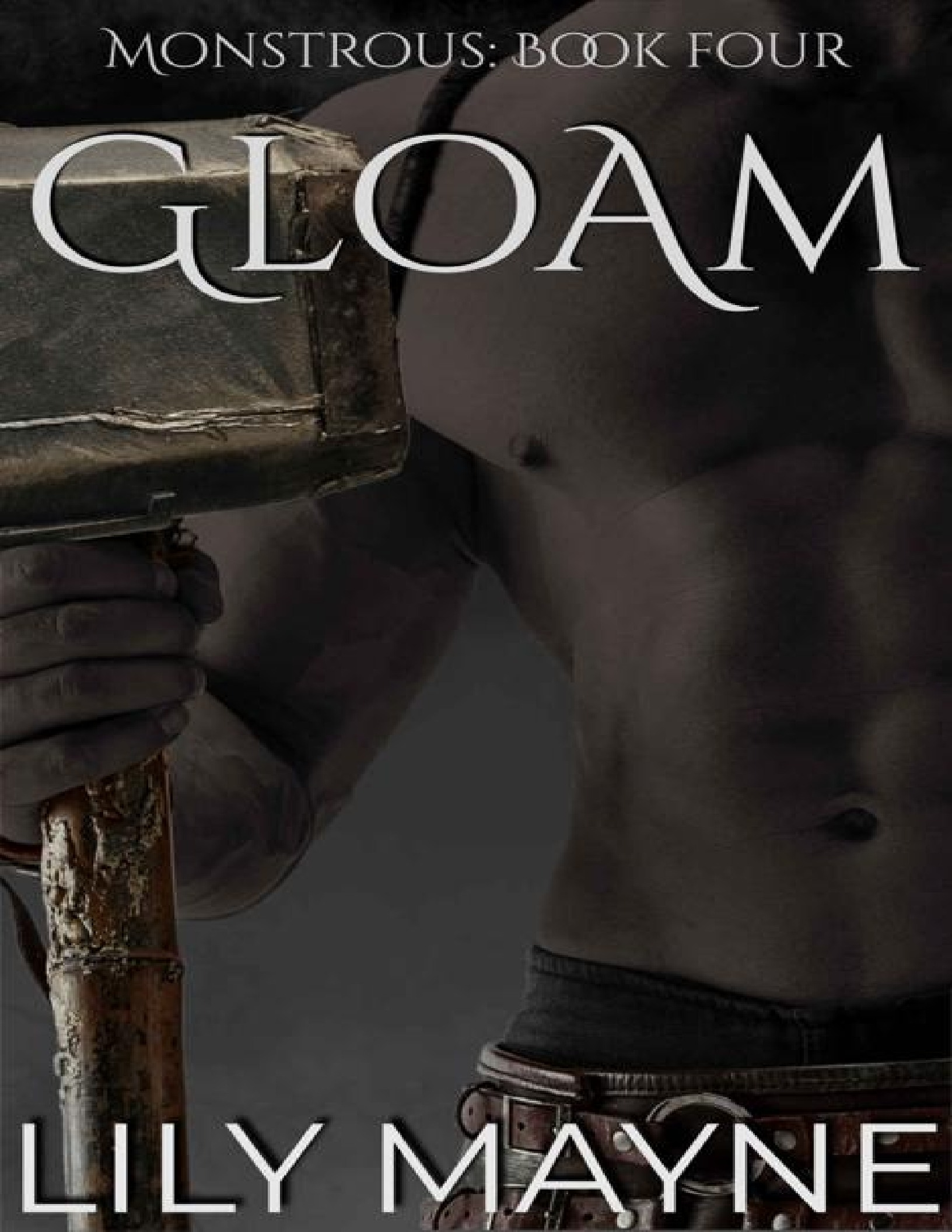
MONSTROUS: BOOK FOUR

GLOAM



LILY MAYNE

GLOAM

MONSTROUS
BOOK FOUR

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OceanofPDF.com

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Beta-reading and proofreading by Kate Wood Proofreading

Warning: *This m/m love story contains explicit sexual content and is not suitable for young readers. It also contains graphic depictions of torture and violence.*

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CHAPTER ONE

Was it wrong of me to be staring at a monster's ass?

I was pretty sure the answer to that, if I asked anyone in this camp, would be a resounding *yes.* Maybe a *hell yes.* Probably a *what the fuck is wrong with you, dude?*

Well, except maybe from my best friend Ghost. He was clearly already a hopeless mess over Aury, the sombre, winged beastie we'd recently found chained up and injured at an abandoned military base further south.

I wasn't used to seeing Ghost be a hopeless mess over anything but his own internalised fears and worries, so it was a nice change.

But back to the monster's ass.

My view from up here on our camp wall wasn't great, granted, but I still couldn't pull my eyes away. I was supposed to be keeping watch over the whole area, not just the pert, intriguing mounds encased in some weird leather that flexed as the beastie turned, raising one thickly muscled arm to stroke the big, ugly creature that was currently eating leaves and really did look like a ballbag that grew arms and eyes. And horns.

I cocked my head, wishing the big grey beastie would turn around so I could get a full view, not just the side. But even the side view was…

Okay. I'd admit it only to myself, in my own brain, where I was free to think whatever I wanted.

This beastie had a biteable ass.

They'd shown up earlier. A woman who called herself Mary and two big sand-coloured monsters pulling an old RV, with the grey guy walking alongside. With a cage on his head.

And a giant war hammer dragging behind him.

Everything about him should have screamed danger. Terrifying monster that might kill me. Ominous, silent, looming creature from another world that possibly saw me more as a meal than a sentient being.

I *should* have been concerned about what Mary and her monsters were planning on doing. I definitely should *not* have been wondering what this beastie looked like without his pants on. Especially while he was still wearing that harness and those big shitkicker boots.

Adam Pineda, you need to pull your mind out of the gutter! I could practically hear my abuela's voice in my head, scolding me, and feel her chubby fingers giving my cheek a gentle pat to take the sting out of her words. Which—yeah. I loved my abuela, and I missed her every day, but that was not what I needed when I was sporting a semi just from daydreaming about a freaking *beastie* while I watched him like a creeper.

And this was all without even seeing his face. Was I a total perv?

The fact that my best friend *clearly* had a major hard-on for a big, veiny, pale dude with wings alleviated my concerns somewhat. If Ghost could be attracted to a beastie, why couldn't I be? And technically, Aury was more inhuman than this guy. Aury's eyes were, honestly, creepy as shit. He looked a little like an alien. Plus, he had wings and big bird feet. And those barb things.

But then again, maybe this guy had barbs. Or other stuff. Who knew what was hiding beneath that cage?

And those intriguing leather pants?

I was so lost in my slightly dirty thoughts that I about jumped out of my skin when the beastie moved. Especially because that cage had tilted to the side. And up.

Toward me.

I gulped, frozen, fingers gripping the sharp metal edge of the container I was sitting on, my legs dangling over the side. I was high up. Surely he hadn't been able to sense me ogling him, right?

I felt the blood drain out of my face as a sudden realisation slammed into me. What if there were beasties who could hear your thoughts or something?

I decided to test it.

Take your pants off, I projected down at him, staring at that weird cage. *Show me your dick. I haven't seen a dick except my own in so long, man. No one has to know*.

He didn't react.

Okay, so maybe the mindreading thing was a bit farfetched. He could probably just sense me watching him. He looked like an apex predator. They had that kind of instinct, right? Wait, were humans apex predators? Maybe we had been, but I doubted we were anymore.

Either way, he was still watching me. I was pretty sure, anyway. And I was still frozen, staring back. What did he look like under that cage? Why

did he *have* the cage? Did Mary put it on him? Did he like it? Why didn't he take it off?

In fact, *everything* about him confused me. He looked strong. Really strong. Strong enough to rip that chain from the side of the RV. At the very least, he had that war hammer. Why didn't he just smash the padlock if he was being kept against his will? He could certainly overpower one single human, which made me think he was here out of choice. The chain attached to the harness around his thick shoulders was probably just for show, to make him look more terrifying. More ominous. Deadly.

However, I supposed there *was* a small chance that Mary—who I hadn't seen, but Ghost had told me was a tiny, plump human woman—had somehow overpowered this beastie. Which made my thoughts all the more inappropriate. He was potentially being held against his will and here I was, being a total perv over him. I felt my face flush with shame.

That cage finally moved again as he turned once more to face the big saggy beasties. This time, he turned his back on me fully—the very thing I'd been wanting—but I didn't even have a chance to check out his ass properly.

Because I realised where that chain was actually going.

It wasn't attached to the harness over his shoulders, like I'd assumed. The chain keeping him connected to the RV split into three rings at the end, and even from up here, I could see that those rings were somehow embedded in his skin.

I swallowed, mouth going dry behind my mask, any warm thoughts immediately fleeing and a sick, cold feeling spreading through my gut in their place. Those three thick metal rings were protruding from his goddamn spine. Just… going directly into his skin. I was too high up to see how, exactly, but what I *could* see was enough to make me feel sick.

Fuck. Okay. He was definitely being held against his will, then. And I understood why he didn't just rip the chain away. It wasn't like he could easily get those rings out of his spine alone, and the chain trailing from them would make him vulnerable.

Determination flooded me, stiffening my limbs. This beastie needed my help. *Our* help. Somehow, this weird, sick woman had managed to capture him, and had found horrific ways to keep him subservient.

I wasn't sure how much support I'd get if I went to the rest of the camp with the idea to help these beasties. They'd only shown up here a few hours

ago, and there'd already been some hostility toward them, mainly from Cutter, our resident asshole.

But I was good at fixing things—it was the *only* thing I was good at. I'd come up with a way to free these beasties, and then I'd go to Anchor with it. If she was willing to help Aury and let him stay here, I didn't see why it would be any different for these monsters. Ghost would back me up. Apollo would too—he was a good guy. Lilac… Well, Lilac would probably be indifferent. But indifference was technically closer to support than opposition, right? Glass half full, and all that.

Speak of the devil. I hadn't even heard him approach, because sometimes Lilac was sneakier than Ghost somehow, but he suddenly appeared beside me, sitting down and leaning back on his hands as his long legs dangled off the side of the container.

"Weird," he said succinctly, green eyes watching our new visitors above his plain black mask.

"Yeah." I looked back down at the RV, my eyes drawn straight to the caged beastie like a magnet. He was still standing by the big creatures, but he was no longer petting them. Just standing there, unmoving.

It was a little creepy.

"Why do you think they're here?" I asked Lilac.

He shrugged one shoulder. "No idea."

That was all I was going to get from him. He wasn't a big talker. One of those people who contributed to a conversation only when they actually had something of value to add, whereas I was the opposite. I rambled to fill silences and ward off awkward moments. Lilac practically *embraced* awkward moments. Like it was a game to see how uncomfortable he could make people with his silent presence.

I was used to him, though, so it didn't bother me. Besides, everyone thought that Ghost was awkward and quiet and antisocial. And he was, but not with me. So maybe Lilac had someone he was more open with. I was pretty sure there was something between him and Rusty, another raider in our camp, so maybe he was more relaxed around her.

I doubted it, though.

"Is your shift over now?" I asked him.

He'd been keeping watch around the other side of the camp. I hunched forward and rested my forearms on my thighs, wishing the hood of my

sweatshirt was up, because that way it might have been a little less obvious that I couldn't keep my eyes off the big grey beastie.

"Yeah. Just thought I'd come and see what they're doing before heading down." Lilac sat forward and pulled his whittling knife out of his pocket, as well as a little lump of wood in the vague shape of a body. "Keen's taking over from you and he's on his way up. Dinner's ready."

"Okay," I said absently as I continued watching the beastie.

He was as still as a statue. Would he be receptive to help? Would he even be able to understand us if we spoke to him? Would there be *anything* I could do to help him and those two big ballbag beasties who looked placid and gentle? At least *they* didn't appear to have been maimed to keep them in captivity. It looked like their chains were rigged up to the straps going around their arms.

"Guess I'll go get dinner then." I was reluctant to leave, but had no reason to stay. I stood up and brushed off the back of my pants, part of me wanting the beastie to turn and look up at me again, as if I could somehow project to him that I wanted to help him. That I was *going* to help him. I'd already established that he wasn't a mind-reader, because I had yet to see any monster dicks around here.

"Have you seen Ghost?" I asked Lilac before I left. "Is he okay?"

He had to go back out into the Wastes in the morning to look for Moth, and he wasn't happy at all about that fact. I didn't know if it was more to do with having to leave Aury, or having to find Moth, who Ghost had a weird relationship with. I'd been pretty sure they were going to fuck at one point, but then Moth had abandoned Ghost on a scouting trip, and damn, my boy could hold a fuckin' grudge. He hadn't let Moth forget for one second since that he wasn't forgiven.

"Haven't seen him," Lilac said shortly. "Aury is gardening."

"I'll go see if he's alright." I cast one last look down at the beastie, chewing on my lip behind my mask.

"See you later," I muttered to Lilac, whose head was already bent over his whittling knife and wood.

Refusing to look down at the RV again, I turned and headed for the hatch. When I emerged onto the grass through the entrance into camp, I headed first for the vegetable patch to see Aury.

It made me sad to see how everyone avoided Aury. He was creepy looking, sure, but he was the sweetest thing. Quiet and kind and gentle. I

hoped he stuck around, mainly because Ghost was clearly smitten already, but also because he seemed to soothe some of my anxious best friend's frantic nervous energy. Aury was good for him.

"Hey, Aury," I said as I approached him, not wanting to make him jump while he was on his knees, leaning over a plant.

I gave him a wide berth to avoid his wings, although I was pretty sure it was hard for him to stretch them out thanks to the damaged one. I eyed it, sadness tightening my chest. I'd already tried to think of ways I could fix it, but I was in no way skilled enough for something like that.

Endless dark eyes turned up to me. They always looked sad and sombre until Aury smiled, and his face transformed into something sweet. Honestly, I could see why Ghost was already a puddle of goo around this beastie. He was adorable, even with the unnerving black eyes.

And the big bird feet.

"Hello, Rig." He brushed loose dirt from his hands and stood, wobbling only a little on his freshly healed leg. It was wild how quick that break had healed. Monster biology—anatomy? Physiology?—was something else.

He didn't say anything else. Just waited for me to speak, gazing at me with a serious but gentle expression. Aury wasn't the chattiest, but I was used to Ghost, so it didn't deter me.

"You like gardening, huh? You'll get on with Lilac, then. He's our plant overlord here."

Aury smiled again. He looked down at the plants, then glanced over at the other raiders who were currently in the vegetable patch, way down at the other end and clearly avoiding him. His smile dimmed a little.

"People can be assholes," I said, stepping closer and catching myself before I rested a hand on his arm. I was kind of a touchy-feely person, but I didn't want to crowd him. "Ignore them. Or if they're rude, come and tell me. Actually, tell Lilac. He'll get them to stop."

He probably wouldn't even need to speak to do it.

"I understand why they avoid me," Aury told me, his voice low. I was glad he was finally speaking. "They probably don't feel safe with me here."

I scoffed at that. "Why? Because you're a beastie? That doesn't mean anything. I've witnessed humans do some awful shit. Out here *and* in the cities."

I could still clearly see my mama's tear-streaked face as she watched me get thrown out into the Wastes by two soldiers, who'd already been making

jokes about how I'd be dead within the hour. My abuela had been too frail to leave our apartment, so I hadn't even had a chance to say goodbye to her. She was probably gone now. I hoped my mom wasn't too lonely.

I cleared my throat and stared down at the ground until my eyes stopped burning. "Humans aren't automatically better than monsters."

Aury was silent for a long moment, and I really hoped he hadn't noticed me getting emotional. "I don't know if others would agree with you, but thank you, Rig."

I cleared my throat again and fixed my face into a big smile behind my mask. "No problem. So, want to come keep me company while I get some dinner? Has Ghost eaten already?"

Longing flashed through his alien features at the mention of Ghost, and his black eyes flickered toward the motel block behind me. "I'm not sure."

"Shall we go get him?"

The sky was darkening rapidly, the last of the sun blocked out by the tall walls of the camp perimeter. Aury's ghoulishly white skin seemed almost luminescent as my eyes struggled to adjust. It made his eyes look even darker, and threw the rough, burn-scarred texture of his cheek into sharp relief.

"I'll stay here for a while longer," he told me with a small smile. "It's peaceful here. And…"

He shifted on his big, weird bird feet, his smile turning a little hesitant. "I don't want to bother him. I know he likes being on his own. I've taken up too much of his time."

My brow quirked.

"I don't think he minds, Aury," I said, my voice dry.

It was too dark now to truly see, but I could have sworn Aury's face flushed. Fuck, these two were freakin' adorable. Part of me wanted to meddle, push them together, but it was none of my business. I'd just be their silent cheerleader from the sidelines. If anyone in this camp needed to get laid—besides me, of course—it was Ghost.

"Well, if you change your mind, you know where to find him, huh?" I grinned at Aury. "I'm gonna go get some dinner. See you later."

He smiled back. "Bye, Rig."

I passed Lilac on the way to the diner, giving him a nod. Peeking back over my shoulder, I saw him stop beside Aury's winged form and start gesturing at the plants. At least the shy beastie wasn't on his own, then.

The solar fairy lights I'd strung up along the front of the diner years ago were already glowing, and there were several solar lanterns placed along the counter through the windows. Bo's big, bulky outline was dishing up food for the few raiders in there, and I could just about make out Daisy's slight form through the hatch to the kitchen.

The door squealed as I pushed it open, an amazing smell greeting me.

"What have we got tonight, Bo?" I nodded at Rusty, who passed me with a steaming bowl in her hands.

Daisy answered instead, raising her voice to be heard through the hatch. "I made Ghost's favourite and he hasn't even come for dinner!"

"Aw, I'm sure he'll come and get some." I leaned my elbows on the bar, peering around Bo's bulk to look at her. "Or I can take him some."

"You take him some." Her tone was stern. "I made it especially for him. The kimchi will help him get better, and he has to go back out there tomorrow now." She tutted, clearly disapproving of that fact.

I shot a subtle glance over at Anchor, who was sitting in her usual spot at the end of the counter, clipboard in front of her. She didn't look up, but her head bent lower, shoulders hunching.

"No problem," I told Daisy, straightening up when Bo placed two bowls in front of me and started ladling stew into them. The hint of spiciness in the steam that wafted up made my mouth water.

"We'll make up a food package for Ghost," Bo told me in his deep, comforting voice. He stuck spoons in each of the two full bowls and pushed them toward me. "He can have some of my new pemmican batch."

"Thanks, Bo," I said gratefully as I took them. Raising my voice as I turned away from the counter, I added, "Thanks, Daisy!"

I carefully carried the bowls out of the diner and across the grass to the motel, then used my elbow to knock on Ghost's door. "It's me."

When Ghost opened the door a few moments later, I smiled at him. He wasn't wearing his mask, so I could see the full narrow planes of his face, his nicely shaped jaw and straight nose. Ghost had one of those faces that looked almost plain at very first glance—good looking but average. But there was something about him that made you want to stare, and the longer you stared, the more you noticed. I had never been attracted to him, but I could see how handsome he really was.

And I'd also witnessed how longingly Moth stared at him every time he visited the camp and thought no one was looking. Pretty sure that Moth had

absolutely, one hundred percent missed his shot with Ghost, now that Aury was on the scene. If the beastie stuck around, anyway. But something told me he would.

“Daisy said you hadn’t been by to get dinner,” I said to Ghost as he took the bowls from me and headed toward the table in the corner of his room. I shut the door behind me, following him.

“No, I didn’t want to talk to Anchor.” His voice was still a little hoarse from his cold. “What have we got?”

“She made kimchi stew again. Especially for you, she said, because she knows it’s your favourite. And she said the kimchi will help you get over the last of your cold,” I added.

We sat down at the table and I pulled off my mask to start eating. I’d barely taken my first mouthful when Ghost asked, sounding self-conscious, “Have you seen Aury? Is he okay?”

I resisted the urge to smile, instead shovelling in another spoonful of stew. “He was helping in the garden again.”

I remembered the way the others avoided him, his sad smile as he glanced at them. I looked up at Ghost. “No one would go near him, though. Not until Lilac came off guard duty and stayed with him for a while.”

Ghost didn’t say anything, but I saw his features tighten. We ate in silence.

“Sorry you have to go back out there again so soon,” I said as I finished my stew, then grinned teasingly. “I know you’d rather stay here with Aury.”

Ghost rolled his eyes. “Dork.”

I chuckled.

“So, what are you going to do for the rest of the evening? I finished my shift keeping watch just before dinner, so we can hang out.” I had a sudden thought. “Or you can borrow that book. You know, the one you accidentally picked up for Aury.”

It had been a gay erotica novel, a good one. I’d read it too many times over the last few days and devoured it again last night, jerking off twice, part of me sad that it was the most action I’d gotten in years.

Ghost laughed. “It’s good, huh?”

I liked the sight of him laughing, he was always so serious. I tried to get him to lighten up whenever I could.

“Oh yeah.” I shot him a sly look. “Maybe you could read it to Aury.”

Like the cute little ball of anxiety that he was, Ghost went bright red. He cleared his throat.

"Shut up, dork. So, you saw the RV out there," he added quickly. "What do you think?"

I knew he was trying to change the subject, but it worked. The mention of Mary's RV immediately sent my mind back to the big grey beastie, and my mood deflated. It was lucky I was already full, because if I'd still had an appetite, it would have fled. The food in my belly suddenly felt like rocks.

"Super weird," I said distractedly, wondering if Ghost would be open to helping me free those beasties. "And she's chained those monsters up—what the hell?"

"Yeah. It's messed up."

He didn't say any more, and I deflated a little more before rallying. Ghost had gone out there to greet Mary when she arrived, he'd been close to the grey beastie. Maybe he'd spoken to him?

"The one with the war hammer," I began, staring into my bowl in case my expression betrayed anything. "Did he say anything when they got here? Why's he…" I swallowed. "What's with the cage on his head?"

"No idea." Ghost got up and started lighting candles as the last of the light faded through his open curtains. "But no, he didn't say anything. Just clicked at the two beasties pulling the RV to get them to stop."

He clicked at them? So he could make noises under that cage. Maybe he could speak. Maybe he would be able to tell me if he wanted to be freed.

I cleared my throat.

"Oh, right," I mumbled as I stacked our empty bowls. Ghost's tone wasn't dismissive, but I knew him well enough to know that he had enough on his mind without me suddenly blurting out that we needed to help free Mary's pet beasties.

He was probably more focused on having to go out and find Moth in the morning. Ghost went out into the Wastes all the time, so I didn't think it bothered him all that much, but I worried every time he left the camp. Even though his trips never seemed to be particularly eventful, judging by what he reported back.

"So, want to hang out for a bit?" I asked.

If I didn't, I'd just sit in my room and stew. I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep, because my mind would be racing with half-baked ideas to free Mary's beasties. Sometimes the only thing that quieted my head was fixing

shit, which was why I did it often. It calmed me down, because my mind went blank while I focused on a task so completely.

This wasn't that kind of task, though. This would just churn me up more because I wouldn't be able to do anything at first. Maybe not for a long while. Maybe not at all. But I was determined to try. We couldn't let Mary just keep monsters chained up with metal through their fucking spines.

My shoulders slumped when Ghost said, "I think I'm just going to shower and go to bed."

I didn't try and push him, though. "Yeah. You're leaving early tomorrow, aren't you?"

I stood up from the table, picking up my mask and our empty bowls. Balancing them in one hand, I squeezed Ghost's shoulder. "Be careful, okay? And don't punch Moth when you find him."

He shot me a small smile as he opened the door. "I'll try not to."

I gave his cheek a quick kiss before I left his room, carrying our bowls over to the diner. The camp was quiet now. It was too dark for me to see if Lilac and Aury were still in the vegetable patch, but I doubted it. I left my bowls on the counter of the diner with the others, calling out to Bo that I would wash the dishes in the morning, before making my way back across the camp to my room.

I resisted the urge to go back up onto the wall and watch the beastie again. It was pointless, but kind of worrying that I felt such a strong urge to do it. He might not have even wanted my help. He might have been perfectly happy as Mary's bodyguard. But I remembered those thick metal rings going into his back, and unease made my stomach squirm. He wasn't happy, I just knew it. I could feel it. He wanted to get free. He didn't want that cage on his head. He didn't want to be here.

I needed to help him.

I headed into my room, part of me wanting to knock on Ghost's door and ask him to keep me company despite what he'd said, just so I didn't drive myself crazy all night wondering what I could do, but I didn't. He'd said he wanted to go to bed, and I knew he had to get up early tomorrow to go back out into the Wastes.

The moment I got inside my room, I headed straight for the small tin on the table that was filled with my homegrown dried tobacco. I'd turned the bathroom attached to my room into my little tobacco farm, hanging it up in there to dry.

I sat on the edge of my bed and rolled myself a cigarette, my stomach jittery with unease and my brain churning as I tried to come up with ideas to get those beasties free.

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CHAPTER TWO

Had I said I wanted Ghost and Aury to get together?

I'd changed my mind.

As happy as I was for my best friend that he was finally getting laid, I absolutely did not want to hear it. I'd been lying in bed unable to fall asleep, staring up at the dark ceiling as my mind churned with thoughts of the enslaved beasties outside the camp, when the muffled yet unmistakable sounds of sex started filtering through the wall I shared with Ghost.

I sat up immediately and practically flung myself out of bed to get away.

Nope. No, thank you. I would have lived a very happy life without knowing what my best friend sounded like in the throes of monster-induced passion, but it was too late for that now. That knowledge had already burned itself into my brain, and I had to find a way to live with it.

I dressed quickly as the sounds got louder and more… climactic, hurrying to shove on my boots and fix my mask over my face. I was still shrugging on my beloved western jacket as I left my room, shivering in the cool night air. It was dark and quiet, and I was grateful for my leather mask keeping the lower half of my face warm as I made my way to the container entrance.

As I emerged from the hatch at the top of the wall, Cutter glanced over at me with a grunt. That was right—Anchor had given him the dreaded night shift for being a total asshole and refusing to go look for Moth so Ghost could have a break after getting sick from his last trip out. God, I hated that guy.

I ignored him, cutting right to walk to the far end of the wall, where Mary's RV was. I sat down on the edge, legs dangling, my eyes immediately homing in on the big grey beastie.

He was standing in the shadow of the RV, but the moonlight made his still form visible. I shivered, lifting the hood of my sweatshirt over my head, wondering if the beastie got cold. He was shirtless, so I doubted it. But then again, maybe Mary just hadn't given him a shirt.

There was hardly any light, but the moon was full enough for me to see his outline. The lights in Mary's RV were off, but even from up here I could hear the low hum of a generator down there, explaining how she had power.

I flinched, my shoulders hunching up when Cutter's bulky form dropped down beside me on the edge of the container with a grunt. I side-eyed him and shifted an inch along so his leg didn't touch mine.

"I still say we just shoot it."

My hands clenched into fists on my thighs. "Fuck you, Cutter."

He snorted, and I felt his eyes boring into the side of my face.

"Don't tell me you're as perverted as Ghost." He gestured at the unmoving beastie. "You want to fuck it, you sick freak? Is that why you're sitting up here gawking at it?"

My breath hissed out between clenched teeth behind my mask. "Shut the hell up. Don't you have *any* fucking compassion?"

"Compassion?" he echoed incredulously. "Compassion for the things that destroyed the world and ruined all our lives? Why the *fuck*, Rig, would I have compassion for *that?*"

He pointed down at the beastie again, making my shoulders hunch up further. Could he hear us up here? It was dead quiet out here, not even the rustle of the trees behind the camp breaking the silence.

"She's got it right," Cutter said in a flat voice. "Chaining them up. Reminding them who's in charge here. This is *our* world, not theirs. I hope the military wipes them out."

"If you love the military so much, why did you even come out here?" I hissed. "Why aren't you in one of the cities?"

He snorted. "I don't love the military, boy. I don't trust 'em for shit. *That's* why I'm out here. I'm not being controlled by anything."

"Monsters aren't trying to control us, Cutter."

He made a derisive sound. "No, they're just trying to murder and eat all of us. That freak living in Ghost's room will lose it and kill all of us one day if we let it stay. Mark my words."

"You're such a prick," I muttered, shifting further away from him. "Leave me alone. Leave Aury and Ghost alone. Just fuck off, Cutter."

He was quiet for a moment before huffing out a disgusted sound. "Yeah, alright. I'll leave you alone to your sick thoughts about that thing down there."

He stood up, and I could feel his eyes on the back of my head.

"If you love monsters so much, why don't you live out there with them, Rig?" He pointed again at the RV. "Go with her. Take Ghost and that thing with you. Do us all a favour."

My breaths were leaving me in forceful pants, and I stayed perfectly still until I heard his boots against the container as he walked back to his post by the hatch.

"Fuck you," I muttered under my breath, wishing I'd brought my cigarettes so I had something to do with my hands.

I wrapped my jacket tighter around myself, tucking my hands under my armpits in an attempt to warm them through the cold leather. I stared down at the beastie. He hadn't moved, but for some reason… I just knew he'd heard all of that. Monsters had good hearing, I was sure. Better than ours. And Cutter hadn't been trying to keep his voice down.

Sorry, I thought sadly, staring at his cage. *We're not all like him and Mary.*

He didn't move. Didn't turn that cage to look up at me. He was like a statue down there, one hand holding his war hammer in a loose grip, its mammoth head resting on the ground.

I shivered again and hunched in on myself. It was freaking cold. I didn't even know what I was doing up here, watching him, but I didn't want to go back to my room yet. Not while Aury and Ghost were getting, uh… better acquainted.

Eventually, the cold and creepiness of the black Wastes forced me to stand up, my limbs stiff and eyes drooping with exhaustion. I cast one final look at the beastie before heading to the hatch.

Cutter shot me a sneer over his shoulder and my lip curled at the sight of him, but a mean little part of me was gratified to see him shiver and rub his hands together to ward off the cold. I didn't say a word, just descended through the hatch and made my way back into camp.

Aury and Ghost were only just finishing up their marathon fuck session when I got back into my room. I sighed in relief as it finally fell quiet, sitting on the edge of my bed to pull off my boots.

Fuck Cutter. I couldn't imagine being so bitter and resentful, twenty freaking years after the apocalypse. So monsters had fucked up his chance to buy a goddamn boat. Too fucking bad, asshole. Did he seriously expect any sympathy?

That he could be so hateful when he was safe inside our camp with a decently comfortable life out here, while that beastie was forced to stand exposed in the Wastes, chained up with a cage on his head and rings through his spine, was mind-blowing to me. Did he not care at all? Did he

not see that most monsters weren't so different to us—that they just wanted to live?

Ghost wasn't perverted. Aury wasn't a freak or a *thing*. Neither was the beastie chained to Mary's RV. They were just different. And different was good, in my opinion. Different was great.

If I ever ended up as bitter and ugly as Cutter, I'd walk right out of camp to take my chances in the Wastes myself.

In the end, Ghost didn't need to leave camp to go looking for Moth. The tall half-monster showed up the next morning, having been travelling through the area. I worried about Ghost already being out there, fruitlessly searching for him, until I heard him laughing with Aury in his chicken yard.

They were so freakin' adorable. Pretending they hadn't spent the whole night fucking, acting all shy and uncertain around one another. Ghost had gone bright red when I'd teased him about it, but he'd quickly shut me up when he started teasing me back about wanting "freaky monster sex". My mind had immediately gone to the beastie outside the camp, but it felt so wrong to think of him that way now that I'd seen those metal rings going into his spine.

I found out from Moth what he was. An aytorin. He was strong, Moth said, but apparently not as strong as Aury. Gentle, timid Aury who I'd recently seen stroking the feathers of one of Ghost's laying hens with reverent fingers. I was pretty sure Moth was just fucking with us. He could be an ass sometimes, but he wasn't as bad as Ghost made him out to be.

When Anchor and Ghost decided to visit Mary and see if they could find out what she wanted with us, I immediately said I'd go with them, sensing an opportunity to get closer to the beastie—the aytorin—and maybe speak to him, tell him I wanted to help him and see if he was receptive to the idea.

Lilac was his usual creepy self as we made our way around the camp wall toward Mary's RV, swinging his machete in a loose, easy grip.

I was grateful when Ghost asked, "We're not expecting this to get violent, are we?" because I knew Lilac was scarily adept at taking down monsters and wouldn't hesitate to do so with this one just because the aytorin was far bigger and stronger than he was.

I'd seen the aytorin move the RV and the two big creatures—borolesh, according to Moth—closer to the trees when I'd gone up onto the wall that morning, yet again, to watch them. It was then that I'd noticed the thick cabling that snaked under his skin. Over his rounded shoulders and between his pecs before curving to the sides of his abdomen. I ignored the swooping sensation in my belly when I wondered, just for a second, where else he had them.

I swallowed, second-guessing my urge to speak to this beastie when he swung that huge war hammer up over his shoulder as we approached Mary's RV. Maybe he wasn't friendly. Maybe he wasn't being held captive. Maybe if I got too close, he'd swing that massive weapon around and shatter my skull before I could even say a single word.

I fiddled nervously with my glove as we made our way closer. He watched us silently, his face entirely hidden within that cage, even from this close. The only sounds around us were the lazy chewing of the two borolesh and the rustle of the trees as they reached up to strip another branch of its leaves.

I gawked at Mary when she emerged from her motorhome, not having seen her yet. I didn't know what I'd been expecting, but I was certain it hadn't been this small, plump, unassuming older woman in an immaculate red dress and lipstick.

And I definitely hadn't expected her to be holding a creepy little monster in her arms like a pet chihuahua.

Its dark red head was smooth with a sharply pointed snout, and blank except for two beady black eyes that gleamed at us all excitedly. It had four thin, bony legs, which shook as it let out a shrill chittering sound, its head shaking like a rattle.

I shuddered, looking away from it. It may have made me awful, but I didn't think I wanted to rescue that one.

"Hello, pets." I strained to keep my eyes off the big, silent aytorin as Mary spoke in a sickly voice. "What can I do for you?"

"We want to know why you're really here." Anchor managed to keep her voice steady. "We know you're not just resting. You came here for a reason, otherwise you wouldn't be parked right outside."

Mary let out a creepy chuckle as she petted the burgundy creature in her arms. My mouth twisted beneath my mask when it let out a rattle, its head shaking.

“Alright, I suppose I wasn’t the most subtle, was I?” Her painted smile grew sly. “Have my monsters unnerved you?”

I stiffened when she nodded at the aytorin, who was silent beside her. “Don’t let the cage scare you. Trust me, he looks better with it. He’s a big, ugly brute under there. Aren’t you, pet?”

Fucking asshole. I gritted my teeth hard behind my mask, wanting to tell her that *she* was the ugly one. She may have had the unassuming human face—while the big beastie most likely did not under that cage—but she was ugly on the inside. Ugly and mean and cruel.

Fuck her.

“He doesn’t scare us.” Anchor’s voice was the tiniest bit unsteady now. “But you’ll understand why we’re not buying your story of just wanting to rest when you chose to stop here, right outside our camp.”

“Mm.” Mary sounded like this whole interaction was amusing her. “Let’s go inside and have a chat.”

“We can talk out here.”

“Oh no.” Mary’s mouth twisted with disdain. “I don’t spend much time outside. It’s very bleak out here, isn’t it? No, let’s go inside. I’ll make us some tea.”

This was a game to her, I realised. She was playing with us. Shifting the power to her side, putting us on the back foot by making this conversation happen in *her* domain. Maybe she wasn’t comfortable standing exposed in the Wastes, but that stupid RV was the little kingdom she’d carved out for herself out here.

After Mary disappeared back inside the motorhome, expecting us to follow, Anchor quietly told Lilac to keep an eye on her before saying to Ghost, “Let’s get this over with.”

“Come on,” Ghost said to me before he started heading in.

“I’ll stay out here,” I said quickly, making sure to keep my eyes off the aytorin so Ghost didn’t suspect why. I could feel my face burning, but I didn’t offer anything more. I didn’t want him to worry, and if he knew what I was planning, he’d absolutely worry and try to stop me.

Just like I knew he would, Ghost anxiously said, “Are you sure? It’s not safe—”

“I have my gun,” I reassured him with a smile, knowing full well I would not be using it even if the aytorin attacked me for some reason. I was pretty sure I wouldn’t have a chance to even try.

Fear made my stomach spasm, but I tried to push it back.

“I told Nun to keep an eye on us from the wall.” Lilac’s voice was as inflectionless as ever, but his eyes were piercing as he watched the silent aytorin. ““She’s an excellent shot with her crossbow.”

I gulped, not liking the thought of Nun shooting the beastie—any of the beasties. I’d have to be careful. Keep my distance at first, in case sudden movements or getting too close triggered any predatory instincts in him. I had no idea what he was capable of, but he looked like he was capable of a lot.

The aytorin’s caged head had shifted slightly toward Lilac with his words, but he still didn’t really move. His war hammer rested over his shoulder and my gaze tracked down the ornately carved handle. It looked old and very heavy.

Would he cave my skull in with it?

“Stay alert,” Ghost muttered, gripping my shoulder. I distractedly nodded back, patting his side, impatient for the chance to finally speak to the beastie and see if he could speak back. To see if he wanted my help.

Maybe I’d gotten this all wrong. Maybe he was happy with Mary.

Silence descended as the others went inside the RV. I fidgeted, my throat bobbing as I swallowed nervously and finally let my eyes drift over to the silent, unmoving aytorin. I took a single step closer.

“Can you talk?” I whispered, my stomach jolting with fear when that cage turned sharply toward me.

The aytorin didn’t move. After several long seconds, I shifted my weight nervously.

“D-do you understand me?” I asked, feeling like a dick for asking the question. I assumed he did, because surely he could understand Mary, but he wasn’t responding to me at all.

My breath caught when that cage cocked, then dipped with a single nod.

“C-can you speak?” I asked again, hoping he’d answer this time.

He shook his head once.

Because of the cage, I was guessing. I glanced fearfully at the RV, not knowing how long they’d be in there.

I took a step closer, ignoring the way my stomach squeezed into a tight ball of fear.

“I want to help you,” I whispered, my tone frantic as I glanced repeatedly at the RV. “I want to get you free. I’m—I’m going to try.”

Somehow, the aytorin's big body stilled even more. Standing this close, I realised he was massive. His shoulders and arms bulged, his torso tapering into lean but muscled abs and hips. His thighs were huge.

Even without the war hammer resting over his shoulder, his entire body was a weapon.

I gulped, terrified that he was going to swing that war hammer around and kill me in an instant for even suggesting the idea of freeing him from Mary. Or maybe just for fun—maybe he liked killing. Maybe that was why Mary had chained him up with her.

When he still didn't move, that fear lessened just a little. If he wanted to kill me, he could have by now. Maybe I was being an optimistic idiot, but I was still alive. My brains were still safely tucked inside my skull and not splattered all over the ground.

"If—if I came out here with a notebook, would you be able to talk that way? Writing it down?" I flushed. "I can only speak English. And a little Spanish, but…"

The aytorin nodded quickly this time, a fine tremor running through his towering body.

"Okay," I whispered, nodding. "I'll come back out soon with a notebook, so we can talk."

I gestured at the two borolesh, harnessed to the front of the RV. "I—I want to help them too. I'll think of a way. I promise. I promise I'll do everything I can to help you."

I jumped out of my skin when the RV door swung open and Anchor stomped down the steps, her bushy brows furrowed with concern and anger. When Ghost emerged after her, I hurried over, forcing myself not to look back at the unmoving aytorin.

"You okay?" I asked Ghost, gripping his tense shoulder. "How did it go?"

He shook his head with a subtle gesture at the aytorin and grabbed my arm to tug me away. "She wants Aury."

Horror froze me for a second at the thought that she wanted to capture sweet Aury, who had only recently gotten free from the military, and the implication of what that meant.

"So she does collect monsters?" I asked, feeling sick. Moth had told us he'd heard rumours about her.

Ghost nodded, his eyes grim above his mask as he watched Anchor and Lilac walking ahead of us. “Said she’s got a gallery or a zoo or something further west.”

I choked on a breath. “That’s horrific.”

“And she offered Anchor a trade for Aury.” Ghost’s voice went low and tight with anger, his gloved hands clenching into fists. “Food or weapons or other perks in exchange.”

I swallowed. Ghost was already so protective of Aury, but Anchor had a whole camp to worry about. I stared at her back, part of me expecting the worst.

“Did she… What did she…?”

“She said no, but Mary told her to think about it. She said she’s going to wait.”

Despite the awfulness of it all, hearing that made a tiny bubble of fragile hope form in my gut. If Mary was going to wait, that meant I had time. I had time to think of a way to free her monsters.

I couldn’t help but glance over my shoulder, but neither the RV nor the aytorin were still in sight.

“They’re… She’s staying?”

Ghost nodded. “For a while, at least. I think she thinks Anchor will cave.”

His tone made it clear that he was thinking the same thing.

We got back into camp and after a brief exchange with Moth, I hurried to my room after the half-monster asked if he could speak to Ghost privately. Part of me wondered if he was going to take a desperate stab at convincing Ghost to be with him. Plead with Ghost to pick him over Aury. He’d never come right out and told Ghost that he was in love with him, but it was obvious. Painfully obvious. To everyone but Ghost, it seemed.

I carelessly pulled the gun off my back when I got into my room, dropping my mask and gloves as I hurried over to the piles of stuff I had all over the floor. It was lucky I kept so much of what others deemed junk, because I quickly found an empty notebook and a flat carpenter’s pencil among the piles.

After carefully sharpening the pencil with a craft knife, I set it and the notebook neatly side by side on the little table in my room, then I sat on the bed and stared at them both as I gripped the edge of the mattress tight.

Was I being a total idiot? Was I going to get myself killed trying to help them? I didn't know why my gut was churning with the desperate desire to see the aytorin—and the two borolesh—free, but I knew it wouldn't go away.

It didn't seem like anyone else was going to help them. No one else in the camp had even voiced the idea. Not even Ghost, who'd seen for himself what some people did to monsters out here. I didn't blame him for not concerning himself with this—he had other things to think about—but I didn't think I'd be able to live with myself if I didn't at least *try*.

So I sat on my bed, staring at that notebook, and waited for it to get dark.

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CHAPTER THREE

I'd earned my raider name quickly after joining the camp.

I'd been a gangly, awkward seventeen-year-old, with acne all over my chin and a terrible, botched haircut from my mama, and I was just unfathomably grateful to have found a home out here when I'd been convinced I was going to die in the hungry jaws of a rabid beastie. It meant I was almost manically eager to be helpful and make sure they wanted to keep me.

Cat had given me the nickname after a week of listening to me insert myself into conversation whenever I heard anyone complaining about something being broken or not working.

"I can fix it! I can do that for you! I can rig that up, no problem!"

"We should call you Rig, kid," he'd said, dark eyes twinkling with mirth as he scrubbed a big hand over my head. I'd gone bright red, but secretly been pleased.

My insatiable eagerness to help was likely to be my downfall, I realised as I snuck out of camp into the darkness of the Wastes. To go and try to speak with a beastie who I still wasn't entirely sure wouldn't bash my brains in with his giant war hammer.

I was shivering, not entirely from the cold, as I crept over to Mary's RV and the still, silent aytorin standing beside it in the dark. I could feel his eyes on me already.

"H-hi," I whispered as soon as I was close enough, but not too close.

I stayed several paces back. I didn't know how safe it was to get near him. Although I didn't know how fast he was. Maybe he'd rush at me and I'd have no time to run away, especially since I tended to freeze up.

My pipe gun pressed insistently against my back, between my shoulder blades, but the idea of even attempting to use it made me feel panicky.

I cast a fearful glance at the RV.

"I'm—I'm the guy from before," I whispered in case he didn't remember, my cheeks burning. "Are you okay?"

The aytorin's caged head slowly cocked. At length, he gave a single nod, but I could somehow tell he was confused by the question.

That made me sad. Did no one care about him? Was no one looking for him?

I exhaled. “Okay. That’s good.”

Glancing around warily, my throat bobbed at the inky blackness of the Wastes that swallowed up everything around us. Even the camp wall was just a dark, looming block beside us. I wondered if whoever was keeping watch had noticed me standing here.

“I… I brought a notebook,” I whispered, easing my duffle off my back and crouching to set it on the ground so it didn’t rustle too much as I unzipped it.

I winced at the sharp rasp of the zipper, my fingers trembling a little as I extracted the notebook and pencil. God, this was so dangerous. Mary could wake up and look out her window at any second. Or a beastie could appear from the darkness and drag me off with its teeth clenched around my leg.

I didn’t know if the aytorin would help me if that happened. I didn’t even know if he could. He was chained to the RV.

“Do you… do you want to talk this way?” I asked the silent beastie in a whisper as I straightened back up, my solar lantern in my other hand.

He didn’t move for a long moment, still staring at me. His fingers twitched around the war hammer, making me flinch.

But instead of lifting it to break all the bones in my body, he nodded.

I swallowed and hesitated for only a moment before stepping closer to him. He didn’t move an inch, as if he could sense how skittish I was.

Exhaling a trembling breath, I switched on the lantern and fumbled to open the notebook to its first page. Now that he’d agreed, I had no idea what to say.

What’s your name? I wrote down eventually, then passed the pencil to him.

It looked ridiculously small in his huge hand, but he clasped it in a delicate grip between long, thick fingers. I held my breath as he put the pencil to the paper. His handwriting was slanting and almost jagged, but still somehow elegant.

I go by Gloam.

Gloam. As strange and inhuman as he was. His wording made me wonder whether that was his real name, but I didn’t question it.

And you? he wrote, then passed the pencil back. I made a mental note to bring two next time, so this could go quicker.

Adam, but I go by Rig normally. My raider name. We all tend to use them to stop the military being able to identify us out here.

Especially when we were technically criminals, like I was.

Adam, he wrote. *Like the first human.*

I stared at his words with a confused frown until I realised what he meant.

You've read the bible? I asked, shocked.

We are word-hoarders, my kind. We read all we can, learn every language we can. It is why we came here. To learn.

We? I scribbled frantically. *There's more of you?*

Gloam's caged head dipped in a slight nod as he scrawled back in his jagged, elegant handwriting.

I travelled to this world with my brothers. Three of us.

Where are they???

His big hand spasmed around the pencil as he took it back.

Still here, he eventually wrote.

Has Mary captured them too???

He didn't move. I didn't know if that meant yes or no.

I was jittery, stomach clenching with the urge to *do* something. To help him.

How did she capture you? I wrote. *I want to help you get free. If I can get the rings out of your back, will you be able to escape?*

He was slow to take the pencil back, and I held my breath when he put it to paper after a long pause.

I cannot answer.

I stared, confused, at the words for a long moment, barely even noticing when his gentle fingers pushed the pencil back into my hand.

What do you mean??? I scribbled. *Why not??*

He tried to write something, but his hand spasmed again, almost hard enough to snap the pencil in half. I peered at the page. Nothing but a jagged line. Not even a first letter to give me any kind of clue.

I heard Gloam take a low breath within his cage, his huge chest rising. Then he tried to write again.

I must protect her. From all.

Dread settled in my gut. Had I gotten this all wrong? *Was* he with her willingly?

I took the pencil back and wrote slowly, swallowing against the lump in my throat.

Do you WANT to protect her?

Gloam was equally slow to respond.

I cannot answer.

Something pinged in my consciousness, a voice whispering in my head, telling me to really *take notice.* To not just brush off his non-answers.

Maybe in his non-answers, he was telling me what he could.

Does the chain actually stop you from escaping? I wrote, any hope I may had of being able to help free him plummeting. *Or is it just for show?*

Gloam's hand spasmed again around the pencil, but he was able to write a reply.

Show. A display of ownership.

Anger burned through me, fast and hot. I clenched my hands into fists, my fingers shaking around the pencil as I wrote back, making my handwriting even messier.

Then why did she put metal rings through your spine???

Once again, he simply wrote, *Show.*

For show. She had maimed him for *fucking show*. The chain did nothing. It didn't stop him from escaping her. The rings in his spine weren't what was preventing him from just pulling that chain free of the RV and walking off.

So what was?

And the cage? I had to ask, even though I didn't want to read the answer. *Is that for show too? Did she put it on you?*

Once again, Gloam's hand spasmed, but his fingers were gentle where they gripped the pencil.

I cannot answer.

So… did that mean the cage *wasn't* just for show? It had a purpose? There was a reason Mary had put it on him?

My head was starting to hurt. I wasn't smart enough to try and work out what he meant. What he was saying with his non-answers. I flushed, feeling woefully inadequate, especially beside this big monster who was clearly incredibly intelligent. Maybe I'd bitten off more than I could chew, opening this dialogue with him.

So there are things you can't tell me, for some reason? I asked him, feeling my gut tighten with worry when I looked up at him and he gave me

a barely perceptible nod.

I want to help you, I wrote, keeping my head bent low over the notebook as I felt Gloam's eyes move from the page to my face. *But I might not be smart enough to work out how. I'm going to try, though. I promise.*

Ghost was the smart one. The reader. I was just the guy who could fix stuff, who was good with his hands. But I didn't think Ghost would be willing to help me with this. He'd think it was too dangerous.

And he had Aury now. He was happy. I didn't want to spoil that for him with a wild, hare-brained scheme that could get us killed. It wasn't fair.

You do not need to concern yourself with this, Gloam wrote back, and my face flushed.

If you want to get free, I'm going to try and get you free. The pencil dug too hard into the page. *And the two borolesh.*

Gloam was still for a long moment, his caged head tilted down toward the notebook. Eventually he took the pencil back, and slowly wrote.

I cannot answer.

But I knew what that meant. It meant that he did. He wanted to get free from Mary.

And I was going to fucking help him.

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CHAPTER FOUR

This was my life now. Days spent desperately trying to come up with a way to free Gloam and the two borolesh, and nights accompanied by the soundtrack of Ghost and Aury fucking like there was no tomorrow.

I sighed, sitting up in bed yet again, for the fifth night in a row, to get dressed and go sit on the wall for a couple of hours until they were done. I considered going next door to the room Aury had briefly occupied, but I had no idea what he'd done with the key and I kept forgetting to ask during the day, distracted by trying to come up with solutions to the Mary problem.

It was getting colder every night, and I shivered as I made my way over the wet grass to the entrance through the containers. I hadn't been back to visit Gloam again yet. I didn't want to give him false hope that I'd come up with a solution. Besides, it was risky as fuck to go out there and try to speak to him while Mary was literally just feet away.

But I wanted to go back soon. I didn't want him to think that I'd forgotten about him. That I'd just given up, or lost interest.

My eyes immediately found him when I emerged through the hatch, even though it was dark out there. His hulking outline was beside the RV, the faint moonlight just reaching him. He was as still as ever. At the front of the vehicle, one of the borolesh shifted on their huge front arms to rub affectionately against the other.

My brows pinched at the sight. Were they siblings? Mates? Had Mary found them together, living peacefully in a forest somewhere, and chained them up to spend their lives dragging her stupid fucking motorhome from their backs?

I could feel my jaw clenching hard beneath my mask as I finally looked away to make my way along the wall. I noticed the outline of Lilac's high ponytail from where he sat at the far end, leaning back on a straightened arm.

I sat down beside him, legs hanging over the edge of the container, and pushed my mask down to my chin to light my cigarette. My sigh was downright orgasmic when I exhaled after my first drag, the grey smoke visible for a few seconds in the dark before it curled away.

"Nasty habit," Lilac commented flatly after a minute of silence.

I snorted, reaching up to rub my eyes, my cigarette clasped between two fingers. “So is killing people.”

“If I start to crave killing like you crave nicotine, everyone in this camp should be worried.” His voice was dry and only faintly amused.

We sat in silence for several minutes, both of us watching Gloam and the two borolesh. Mary’s RV was dark. I assumed she was asleep in there, peaceful, warm and safe while her captured monsters stood exposed to the elements and the Wastes.

I flicked my cigarette butt away, my eyes tracking it until it vanished beneath our feet, falling all the way down the length of the camp wall. Lilac sat forward and glanced over at me.

“Can’t sleep?”

I snorted, reaching up to wipe my cold nose before I fixed my mask back over my mouth. “No.”

“You’ve been spending a lot of time up here. Watching.”

I flushed, shrugging in an attempt to look nonchalant. “There’s finally something interesting to look at.”

“Mm.” I hunched when I felt Lilac’s keen eyes on me again. “Which *something* are you referring to, exactly?”

My face burned hotter, and I resisted the urge to reach over and shove him. Wasn’t exactly safe while we were sitting on the edge of a very high wall.

“Shut up.”

He huffed, turning to look back down at the RV.

After a minute of silence, he spoke again. “You do seem particularly intrigued by the beastie with the war hammer.”

Was I really that obvious? Or maybe Lilac was just that perceptive—like Ghost. He didn’t talk much, which meant he probably saw things others didn’t. I was the opposite, yammering away mindlessly, oblivious to everything.

“I just… He needs help.” I shrugged again, shoulders slumping in despondence. “Look at him, Lilac. And the two borolesh. That’s no life.”

“It’s not,” he agreed. “Not sure what we can do about it, though.”

“Well, I want to do something,” I blurted. “I want to help them.”

Lilac was silent for a moment.

“How are you going to do that?” he eventually asked.

I exhaled and wiped a hand over my forehead, my limbs tight with tension. They'd already been here a week, and I'd done nothing.

"I don't know."

Lilac leaned back on one hand, green eyes still fixed on the RV below us. "Want me to kill Mary?"

I choked in shock, even as a tiny part of me that I didn't like clamoured to say yes. She wasn't a good person—she was awful, keeping monsters chained up and captured in her sick menagerie for profit. For rich fucks to gawk at.

But that didn't mean I wanted her blood on my hands.

"Didn't we just talk about your insatiable bloodlust?" I said faintly, a weak attempt at a joke.

Lilac just shot me a look, his right brow twitching up.

I swallowed. "I think Anchor would have something to say about that."

Lilac shifted, sitting forward to rest his forearms on his thighs, clasping his hands together. "Anchor doesn't have to know. I can make it look like an accident."

I swallowed. "What if—Wouldn't the aytorin kill you?"

He gave a tiny shrug. "He might try, I suppose. Do you really think he cares about her, then? That he wants to protect her?"

I knew he didn't. But I also knew something was stopping him from hurting her—and potentially stopping him from letting *others* hurt her. As much as I wanted to help Gloam and the borolesh, I wasn't willing to risk Lilac for that.

"I don't think he wants to protect her, but I think he has to," I said, staring at Gloam as he stood there, unmoving, beside the RV.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Lilac cut me a sharp look. "What makes you say that?"

I shrugged uncomfortably, not knowing how much to reveal. It felt… private. Like Gloam's business. Gloam's secrets.

Still, I had to give Lilac something. He was watching me silently, waiting for an answer.

"I've talked to him," I admitted, peering back over my shoulder to make sure no one was near.

If Ghost found out I'd snuck out of camp in the middle of the night to talk to a potentially deadly beastie, he'd kill me himself.

But of course he wasn't out here. He was too busy getting dicked down by a tall, black-eyed dude with wings and bird feet.

Lilac's brow quirked. "You mean when we went to speak to Mary just after she arrived, when you stayed outside the RV? He really spoke to you?"

"No, I… I mean yes, I tried talking to him then. But he can't talk back. The cage stops him, I think." My face tightened as I watched Gloam. "But then I… I kind of… snuck out. To speak to him."

Lilac went very still. "You snuck out."

"I took my gun, and I didn't get too close at first," I said quickly, feeling my face get hot, wondering if Lilac thought I was a total brainless idiot.

"At first," he echoed in his flat voice.

My cheeks burned even hotter. "Well, I mean, I was whispering so I didn't wake up Mary, so it just made sense to… Anyway, nothing happened. But I took a notebook and he—we spoke to each other that way."

Lilac said nothing for a long moment, eventually looking back down at the RV and the beasties around it. I fidgeted beside him, feeling like a kid sitting beside a silent, disapproving parent.

"Pretty reckless," he eventually commented. "He could have turned you to pulp with that war hammer."

I didn't voice that I had, for a brief moment, had that exact fear.

"He's not violent," I said instead. "He's just… somehow been roped into being Mary's protector."

"He didn't tell you how?"

I shook my head. "He… I don't think he can, for some reason. It's so weird, Lilac. It was like he went to write sometimes, but he couldn't. And it was always when I asked something about Mary."

"Huh."

We watched Gloam in silence for a few minutes before Lilac spoke again.

"Are you going to do it again?"

I cleared my throat, preparing to be berated. "Yes. I want to help him. I want to free him."

I was surprised by what Lilac said next.

"Alright." He looked back over at me. "But maybe go and visit your new monster friend when I'm keeping watch. So I can keep an eye on you."

I nodded quickly. "Alright. Good idea."

"Does Ghost know?"

Guilt made me want to squirm.

"No. And maybe… maybe don't tell him yet?" My voice was pleading. "He'll just worry and try and talk me out of it."

"He will," Lilac agreed. "I'm actually surprised he didn't notice the first time you did it. He normally notices everything. But I suppose he is distracted at the moment."

I let out a strangled sound. Yeah, no shit he was distracted.

"I don't want him to stress," I told Lilac. "No more than he already is, with Mary lurking out here waiting to snatch up Aury. He doesn't need to know."

Lilac was silent for a while. "Alright. Just let me know when you're going out there. I'll borrow Nun's crossbow."

I balked at the thought of Lilac shooting Gloam with a crossbow. Although, I was pretty sure that an arrow wouldn't be enough to take him down. He was so… big.

"He won't hurt me," I said quickly. "I know he won't. But okay. I'll let you know."

I thought about it, wondering when I could next go and speak to him. He was a dark, unmoving mass down there in the shadow of Mary's RV. For some reason, I was suddenly hit with an overwhelming urge to talk to him again. To be near him. To try and give him even a hint of comfort, or at least social interaction.

"I'm going to speak to him." I scrambled to my feet.

Lilac stilled.

"Right now?" he asked, head tilting up as he eyed me.

I nodded. "Yeah. Gonna go grab my notebook and go out there."

Lilac let out a faint exhale. "Alright. Be careful."

I was already heading back toward the hatch. When I got into my room to grab a lantern, our notebook and two pencils, I could still hear Aury and Ghost through the wall. I cringed, gathering my stuff as fast as possible and making a hasty exit.

I was shivering as I made my way out of the camp and into the terrifying pitch black of the Wastes. When I rounded the wall and Gloam came into view, I hurried over, eager to be by his side, because it felt safer there. He was watching me, but he was as still as ever.

I glanced fearfully at Mary's RV, but it was quiet and dark inside. In fact, I could faintly hear her snores as I got closer.

“H-hi,” I whispered. “It’s me.”

I felt myself go bright red for saying something so idiotic. Of course he could see it was me. *Dumbass.*

“I brought the notebook,” I whispered, fumbling to take it and the two pencils out of my duffle without making too much noise.

Gloam was quick to take the book from me. He’d already started writing as I lit my lantern so I could see. Guess he didn’t need the light.

When he handed the book back, I squinted down at what he’d written in the low light.

It is dangerous out here. You should stay in your camp where it is safe.

“I wanted to speak to you,” I whispered, then winced and quickly scribbled in the book.

I’m sorry I haven’t been out for a while. I’ve been trying to think of a way to free you.

His hand spasmed around the pencil, and he slowly wrote back.

Why?

My breath left me in a shaky rush.

Because you don’t deserve this, I wrote back. *No one deserves this.*

Gloam stared at the words for a long moment. His fingers twitched around his war hammer, and I couldn’t contain my flinch. Despite what I’d said to Lilac, a tiny part of me still expected him to swing it up and crush my head with it.

He must have noticed, because his caged head quickly lifted to look at me.

I won’t hurt you, he scrawled. *I’m sorry if I scare you.*

I immediately felt like shit.

You don’t, I wrote quickly. *Sorry, I just don’t like the Wastes. Or the dark. I’m on edge.*

Go back inside your camp, Adam. Please.

I shook my head even as I kept it bent so I could see what I was writing.

I haven’t thought of a way to do it yet, but I’m not giving up. I’m going to free you.

You can’t, he wrote.

Indignation made me speak out loud, but I had enough sense to keep my voice to a low hiss. I ripped off my mask so I knew he’d be able to hear me.

“I’m not letting you stay like this, Gloam,” I whispered, clenching my hands into fists by my sides. “I’m not letting her do this to you. *She’s* the

monster.”

I could feel him watching me from beneath the cage. For a long moment, he didn’t move. Then he looked back down to write again.

Do not put yourself in danger for me.

That made me swallow nervously. What was the danger? Mary? Would she try and hurt me for freeing her beasties? I supposed it was kind of naïve of me to assume she wouldn’t.

Which meant I’d have to do it secretly. Somehow.

When they were all chained to the RV that she never left.

The pressure of this monumental task that I’d given myself made my forehead bead with sweat despite the cold air. I shot a nervous look up at Gloam, and I knew he was watching me even though I couldn’t see his face at all.

Somehow, I could sense the gentle tone he was trying to convey when he continued writing.

Thank you, Adam. But you shouldn’t put yourself at any risk for me.

I bristled, feeling childish when I wrote back, *Well you can’t stop me. I’m going to try anyway.*

Gloam read my words, and I jumped a little when he let out a tiny, amused rumble from deep in his chest. My cheeks flushing, I chanced a smile up at him.

He went totally still, staring back at me from within the cage. I could feel the weight of his gaze on my face and it made me shiver. But not from fear. And not from the cold.

Clearing my throat quietly, I wrote, *I shouldn’t stay out here for too long, but I’ll come back soon. Even if I haven’t thought of a way to free you yet. If you just want to talk.*

My cheeks were burning when I handed the notebook to him and waited for him to read what I’d written. Why would he want to talk to me? I wasn’t all that smart. Or interesting. I could be funny, but this wasn’t exactly a laughing matter.

And this beastie was clearly intelligent. Mary had called him a brute, but he wasn’t at all. His body was big and muscular, but he moved gracefully, even with that heavy cage weighing him down.

He handed the notebook back after writing something in response.

I tried to ignore the burst of warmth that bloomed in the pit of my stomach when I read the words, *I would like that very much*, in his elegant,

jagged scrawl.

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CHAPTER FIVE

This was dangerous. It wasn't even fully dark yet. Mary could easily look out of her RV window and see me.

That didn't stop me from continuing on my way along the camp wall, hugging it furtively to remain out of sight, before jogging the short distance to Gloam. It had been two weeks since they'd arrived, and I still hadn't figured out how I was going to free him. How I was going to get that cage off his head.

I knew I should have waited for it to get dark before coming out here, but I wanted to try and take a look at his cage in better light than what my solar lantern gave off. I wanted to see if there were any obvious locks or mechanisms I could pick to remove it. Mary had got it on him somehow, which meant I'd surely be able to find a way to take it back off.

I knew Lilac was keeping watch up on the wall, but I hadn't explicitly told him I was coming out here. It didn't matter. I knew by now that Gloam wouldn't hurt me, it was Mary who was the worry. I just had to make sure she didn't see me.

"Hey," I whispered when I reached him. "I can't be long. I just wanted to take a look at the cage in better light. Is that okay?"

Gloam didn't move, so I gestured at the duffle slung over my shoulder and spoke again hurriedly.

"I brought our notebook so we can talk, and a pick if there's a lock on the cage." I gave him a small, hopeful smile, hoping it would be visible in my eyes. "Maybe we'll be able to get it off today."

I tried to believe the words as I said them, but even from here, as I swept my eyes over the cage on his head, I couldn't see any kind of lock that I would be able to pick.

Stiffening my shoulders to stop them from drooping with hopelessness, I nodded at the back of the RV. "Can we go stand around there? Will your chain extend that far? I don't want Mary to see me."

He nodded quickly, clearly not wanting that either. Together, we walked around to the back of the RV, out of sight of the main windows. There was only a narrow, high-up window stretching across the back of the vehicle, and the room inside looked dim.

“Okay.” I exhaled a hard breath and set down my duffle. “Let’s take a look.”

My cheeks got hot as I stared at up Gloam towering above me. “Would you, um… Do you mind kneeling so I can have a closer look?”

He nodded and gracefully knelt, one hand still gripping the handle of his war hammer. Clearing my throat quietly, I stepped closer and tried not to stare too hard at his impossibly wide shoulders. That close, I could see that the cabling under his skin had a slight texture to it, delicate lines than ran within the raised ridges.

His grey skin was mottled in colour, but smooth and unblemished. I ignored the pressing urge to rip off my glove and trail my fingertips over it to see what it felt like.

Reluctantly raising my eyes to the cage, I stared at it. The indignity of him having to carry this immense weight on his literal shoulders made fire burn hot in my belly.

The cage was thick, dark metal. Squarish around his jaw and more rounded at the top, as though it lightly followed the curves of his skull. It had bars of some kind, but they were packed so tightly together that not an inch of his head beneath was visible. There was a narrow slit for him to see, but it was angled and completely dark within. I wondered if it impeded his vision.

The cage encased his entire head without a millimetre of space under his jaw or around the back of his neck. Like it had been glued to him. Did it cut into his skin? Did it rub his face raw?

I inspected every inch of it while Gloam knelt there patiently. My stomach lurched when I placed a hand on his shoulder to steady myself as I leaned down and peered up at its underside, where it sat tight under his chin and against his neck.

His skin was so hot, even through my glove. I could feel the raised cabling under my fingers, the slight texture on it, and I bit my lip as I resisted to urge to trace its length.

There was no lock. No opening of any kind, nothing I could carefully unlatch with my lockpick. It had no seam other than the thick, bubbled one across the top that told me it had been welded together when it was being forged.

My chin wobbled, but I tried to keep the despondence out of my voice.

“Okay. That’s okay.” I worked hard to keep my tone cheerful, but I didn’t know how well I succeeded. “We just have to find another way. That’s fine.”

I stepped back, my heart pounding as Gloam rose gracefully to his feet. How the fuck was I going to do this? I didn’t have any power tools strong enough to cut through that, and even if I did, I was pretty sure Mary would notice the relentless shriek of me cutting through the metal just outside her RV.

I had my rotary blade, but that wasn’t powerful enough. Nowhere near.

But it was all I had. I’d have to try.

“Okay, I… I might have something.” I bit my lip hard, not wanting to give Gloam false hope. “Maybe. If it’s strong enough. But we’ll have to try and think of a way to do it when… when Mary isn’t around.”

Gloam started to shake his head—probably meaning that there was *never* a time when Mary wasn’t around—but then we both froze when we heard the RV door swing open.

“Where are you?” Mary snapped.

I stared at Gloam, fear keeping me frozen in place as the sound of small feet clomping down metal steps and thudding onto the ground reached us.

His big body stiffened, and his caged head jerked hard toward the other side of the RV, telling me to hide there until she went back in.

My breath caught when he suddenly groaned deep in his chest and stepped back, shoulders bulging with tension. He did it again even as he desperately tried to get me to move with the frantic jerk of his head.

My feet finally unglued from the ground and I stumbled toward the far side of the RV. As I did, I realised what was happening. Mary was yanking on his chain, pulling at those rings piercing his spine. My mouth trembled as I crouched against the side of the RV, keeping low to avoid the windows.

My chest ached for him, that had to be agony, but the fire driving me to help him burned even hotter. I’d get him away from that monster if it was the last thing I did.

Gloam had gone, and I could hear Mary barking something at him, but I couldn’t take in what she was saying. My ears were ringing with fear and fury on his behalf. She treated him like an animal. *She* was the fucking animal.

I didn’t know how long I crouched there, sweating, my heart thudding hard against my ribs, before Gloam reappeared and gestured for me to go.

“I’ll come back soon,” I whispered, resisting the urge to place a hand on his chest as I crept past him and back toward the camp.

Somehow, I remained unseen by Mary, who really was the most obnoxious asshole I’d ever had the misfortune of meeting. Just as I was about to emerge from the container entrance and back into camp, Lilac swung down from the next level up. His boots reverberated against the metal with a thud as he landed, graceful as a cat.

“Ghost saw you,” he told me bluntly, and panic streaked through me. “But then Anchor called for him. I think she’s going to ask him to head back out.”

I bristled, my worry about Ghost seeing me sneak out to speak to Gloam overridden by indignant anger on his behalf. Couldn’t Anchor just cut him some slack and let him enjoy this honeymoon period with Aury? That wasn’t to say I wouldn’t have enjoyed a break from hearing them constantly fucking like bunnies next door, but it didn’t seem fair.

Ghost wasn’t good at defending himself or saying no most of the time. Fully prepared to be his spokesperson, I hurried toward the diner. I could see him and Anchor staring at each other tensely as I got closer.

“Hey.” I tried to keep my tone casual as I stepped inside. “What’s going on?”

Ghost’s eyes flared with anger as he spun to face me, pointing a sharp finger at my chest. “I need to speak to *you* in a minute.”

I nodded, swallowing nervously and trying to mentally prepare myself for the chewing out I knew I was going to get from him for sneaking out to speak to Gloam.

Anchor’s dark eyes were bracketed with tension when she spoke up. “I just… I asked Ghost if he’d be willing to go to the Topeka camp to see if they’ve heard anything about Cat.”

I frowned at her. “Is it, like, an *essential* trip, though?”

When she exploded with a sudden, fiery outburst in response to my question, my eyes widened in shock. I only just prevented myself from taking a step back.

“Am I the only one who still gives a fuck about Cat?” Her eyes flashed. “Yes, Rig, it’s essential to *me* because Cat is still out there somewhere. We need to find him.”

I forced my voice to remain calm and steady. “I get that, and of course we still care about Cat. Of course we want to find him. Does it have to be

Ghost?”

Anchor’s eyes were wide with disbelief. I felt Ghost shrink just a little beside me.

“It’s *always* Ghost,” she practically yelled. “It’s always been Ghost. He’s our scout. That’s his *job*.”

My best friend’s shoulders hunched up as she glared at him.

“You don’t want to do your job anymore? You want to stay here with your beastie instead? Your loyalties have changed pretty quick, Ghost.”

Anger flared in my gut.

“Hey, what the *hell*, Anchor.” I gripped Ghost’s arm tight, trying to comfort him with a squeeze of my fingers. I could hear him panting. Anxious, panicked breaths behind his mask. My chest ached for him.

“God, I’m sorry.” Anchor’s voice shook.

The loss of Cat had changed her. Made her more volatile but depressed at the same time. That didn’t mean I was going to let her take it out on Ghost, though.

“I’m sorry, Ghost,” she repeated shakily. “I didn’t mean it.”

Neither of us said a word as we stared at her. I didn’t let go of Ghost’s arm, wanting to pull him tighter to me as if that would protect him.

When he mumbled, “It’s okay. I’ll go,” my stomach tightened with misery for him.

I shook my head and squeezed his arm again. “Someone else can—”

“It’s quickest if I do it,” Ghost cut in, his tone despondent. “I know the way. I’ve been before. They know me.”

Anchor was quick to ask, “Are you sure?”

Anger flared in me again. It was easiest for her if Ghost just agreed. And she knew he would. He always did.

He nodded once, eyes low. “I’m sure.”

I was surprised when he then looked up at her with a hard, defiant gaze. “As long as you promise to protect Aury. Get Lilac to keep an eye on him.”

“I promise,” she said immediately.

I watched Ghost as he turned to leave. “I’ll head out tomorrow.”

God, poor Ghost. He clearly didn’t want to go. He wanted to be here with Aury. He would just worry about his beastie while he was out there. He was probably terrified that Mary would have somehow got him by the time he got back, and he’d never see him again.

My lip curled under my mask when Anchor called out, “Thank you, Ghost,” as I followed him out of the diner.

I figured he would want to go and find Aury, to spend as much time with him as possible before he had to leave, but Ghost grabbed my arm and tugged me into his room when we reached the motel. I swallowed, feeling nervous.

“You could have refused,” I mumbled, shutting the door behind us and taking off my mask now that it was just us.

Ghost made a humourless sound as he ripped off his gas mask and discarded it on the bed. “Who else is going to do it?”

I clutched my mask as I looked at him. Really looked at him. I could see how tense his face was at the thought of going back out there. The tightness bracketing his eyes and pinching his mouth.

My stomach curled up with shame at how easily I’d ignored it all before. I cleared my throat and stared down at the mask in my hand, fingering the metal studs I’d punched into it years ago because I thought it looked cool. It seemed so stupid and childish now.

“Do you really hate it?” I mumbled.

Ghost looked at me, brows still pinched. “Hate what?”

“Going out into the Wastes.”

I wanted to cringe back from the hard, incredulous look he gave me.

“Are you kidding?” he snapped, making me swallow around the lump in my throat. “Of course I do!”

I felt like a total idiot for even asking it. For ever convincing myself that he would be fine with being completely alone and vulnerable out there, while I was taking it easy without any worries inside the fortress-like camp walls.

“Sorry. Dumb question,” I mumbled, my cheeks red with shame. “I just… I thought maybe before Aury you… liked the chance to get out of camp. I mean, you volunteered to start going out scouting almost as soon as we got here.”

Even as I said the words, I could hear the excuses I was making in them to try and make myself feel better.

“Yeah, because I didn’t want to be dead weight!” Ghost shot back, making me flinch.

I couldn’t bring myself to look at him, even when I heard him take a calming breath.

“You were useful, Rig,” he continued in a steadier voice. “You could make stuff. Fix stuff. All I had going for me was… being fast and unnoticeable.”

Did he honestly think that? Did he really think *I* was more of an asset to the camp than he was? All I was fucking good at was cobbling together junk to make something half-usable.

The need to defend my best friend—even from himself—made me finally look up with pinched brows.

“That’s not true, Ghost,” I said as I stepped closer to him, dropping my mask on the table.

“Yeah.” His voice was unnervingly dead. “It is. But it’s fine. It’s not… I can go. Whatever. It’s fine.”

He sounded so forlorn that I wanted to cry. “You could ask Lilac to go.”

“Lilac’s needed here. To protect the camp.”

I bit my lip. “I don’t want you to go. Not if you hate it that much.”

When he didn’t say anything, the despondent acceptance written all over his features, I mumbled, “I’m sorry, Ghost. I was being a dumbass, convincing myself that you actually *wanted* to be out there. Because it made me feel better for staying here all the time, I guess.”

I was such an asshole. How could I have let my best friend do this for *years* while I sat safe and sound inside the camp, merrily tinkering with useless junk and waiting for him to get back? Just because I was needy and wanted to spend all my time with him.

I didn’t feel any better when Ghost gave me a small smile and clasped my shoulder, clearly trying to move past it. “Don’t be silly. Not your fault, dork.”

But it *was* my fault. I could’ve gone out there on scavenging runs. I could’ve at least gone *with* him every time. I’d been such a baby. Even on our recent trip to the military base—my first venture out of the camp in *years*—I’d whined the whole way there about how shit it was, how much I didn’t want to do it. I’d even joked about how Ghost had better protect me if any beasties appeared and tried to eat us.

God, I was such an ass. A sorry excuse for a raider and a friend.

My breath caught when Ghost spoke again, his words making my stomach clench up and my face get hot with embarrassment.

“But you could do me a favour while I’m gone and not be a fucking idiot.”

I knew exactly what he was referring to. He'd seen me out there talking to Gloam.

Trying to ignore the sting from his words, I did my best to look guileless as I stared at him. "Huh?"

He wasn't fooled. He huffed and thumped my shoulder. "What the hell are you doing, Rig, sneaking out there to talk to that beastie?"

My face burned. "I just—He needs help. He doesn't want to be stuck with Mary. You can see that for yourself."

"He could be dangerous!" Ghost snapped.

"Aury could have been too." I felt childish as soon as the words left me.

"But Aury clearly wasn't, Rig. He was chained up and injured." He waved a hand at the door. "That dude is huge and has a *gigantic war hammer*."

"We don't know that for certain," I said in a weak attempt to lighten the mood with a joke. A terrible, terrible dick joke. I shouldn't even be *thinking* about Gloam in that way. Not while he was still captured.

Ghost didn't get it at first, and he wasn't amused when he finally did.

"What? What the hell are you—" He huffed in exasperation. "Be serious, Rig."

"Okay, look." I gestured at him to calm down—to not start working himself up with worry. "I just want to try and help him. And those other two beasties chained up."

I thought about the creepy burgundy creature Mary kept in her arms like a baby. "Maybe not the little one. It freaks me out and she seems to have domesticated it, anyway. But if I can get the aytorin and two borolesh free __"

"How are you planning on freeing them?" Ghost interrupted tersely. "They're chained up! If they could break those chains, they would have. What makes you think *you* can?"

My face got hot as I tried to ignore yet another sting from his words and the implication that I was being an idiot for even trying, because of course, what could *I* do?

"I have a rotary blade." My tone came out humiliatingly weak and childish.

"You don't think Mary's going to notice you cutting through the chains attached to her RV? You don't think she *might* have something to say if she looks out the window and sees you liberating her monster slaves? She has a

gun in there, Rig. I saw it. What if she spots you out there and just shoots you?"

My cheeks burned hotter, even as I felt a flash of fear at his words. "Well, I'm going to do *something*. I don't know how the hell she captured them in the first place, but if I can just get them free, surely she won't be able to again."

I thought of Gloam, standing out there in the Wastes, with metal piercing his spine and a cage hiding him from the world. My chest ached. "Maybe the aytorin can shelter here until she leaves—"

Ghost rubbed his forehead with a jerky hand. "Jesus Christ, Rig."

I flinched. It hurt that he was so reluctant for me to do this. That he clearly thought I was being stupid and reckless—like I hadn't thought any of this through.

And for some reason, it hurt that no one else wanted to help Gloam or the others.

Bristling to mask how upset I was that Ghost was getting angry with me for just wanting to help someone, I snapped, "Look, I didn't ask for your input, alright? So just stay out of it. I'm doing it on my own. I don't need your help."

I immediately felt like shit for my harsh tone, especially when Ghost's eyes flared with hurt, but I couldn't have him stressing about this and trying to convince me not to do it. I was freaking out enough as it was.

I bit my lip when Ghost looked away, his eyes tight with worry.

"I'm sorry," I said hoarsely, wanting to reach out and grip his shoulder.

"I'm just worried you'll get hurt." His voice was quiet, quieter than normal, and his blue eyes got glassy.

My chin trembled, so I stiffened my jaw as I rested my hands on Ghost's shoulders.

"I know, and I love you," I said, my voice hoarse. "But… you worry about *everything*, Ghost. Sometimes that much worry is crippling."

I took a breath. "I'll be careful. I'm not stupid. I know what I'm doing."

Even though I didn't. I had absolutely no idea what I was going to do.

He shook his head, eyes blurring again as he looked down. "I know you're not stupid."

I hadn't realised how much I'd needed to hear those words. Unable to stop myself, I threw my arms around him and hugged him tight. I was so happy for Ghost—so glad he had Aury—but I still missed him now that he

had someone else to spend his time with. We'd been a unit for so long, the two of us. He'd saved me when he found me that day out in the Wastes when I was a kid.

I couldn't bear the thought of him being angry with me or worrying over me.

"Just trust me, okay?" I murmured, ignoring the way my gut clenched up with fear at my own words.

I prayed that I wouldn't give Ghost a reason to feel guilty for not stopping me from doing this. I prayed that I wasn't going to get myself killed.

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CHAPTER SIX

Aury and Ghost were gone, which meant soon—if their plan to trick Mary worked—the monster collector and her pets would be gone too.

I was running out of time.

Anchor planned to give them at least a few days' head start to the Topeka camp before revealing to Mary that Aury was no longer here. That it was pointless to wait here for him, because he was gone.

She was even willing to let Mary into the camp—alone, blindfolded at first to protect the secret of the entrance's location, and with Lilac keeping a very close eye—to prove that there was no valuable rycke staying within our walls.

Once that happened, Mary would leave. Which meant Gloam would leave. Which meant I wouldn't be able to free him.

My heart had been pounding a sickly beat since I woke up, and I was once again sitting on the camp wall, staring down at Gloam uselessly, no closer to freeing him or the two gentle borolesh than I had been more than two weeks ago.

My rotary blade sat on the table in my room, taunting me as I stared at it each night, wondering if I should just go for it and try to cut through the cage or those rings in his back. The problem was, the thing wasn't at all powerful. I'd been shocked when I'd gotten through Aury's chains with it at the military base. I was pretty sure it wouldn't even make a dent in the cage, but I was also pretty sure it was also my only option.

Would she shoot me if she burst out of her RV to find me cutting through her monster slave's chains in the dead of night? Was I willing to die trying to free Gloam?

Before I knew it, another day had passed with me doing fuck all to help him. Then another. I was an anxious mess, jittery and unable to concentrate on anything at all. There were several jobs around the camp I should have already got to by now, but I couldn't focus. My mind was consumed with thoughts of freeing Mary's pets.

Another day passed. Then another. I felt sick constantly, terrified I was going to wake up and they'd already be gone.

I was in the diner when I heard Anchor in the diner telling Lilac that she thought Ghost and Aury had enough of a head start, and she was going to reveal to Mary that Aury was gone later that day. My vision went spotty with panic. This was it. I'd run out of time.

I abandoned the bowl of stew I'd been about to pick up and take back to the wall to continue my pointless vigil and turned to leave the diner as fast as I could. Without thinking, I crossed the camp and ducked inside the container entrance, making my way out into the Wastes.

It was only when Mary's RV came into view that I asked myself what the fuck I was doing, but I still didn't stop. Gloam watched me silently as I walked right up to Mary's door and knocked on it, my heart thudding hard.

It swung open, and Mary looked down her nose at me from her elevated height within the vehicle. Watery blue eyes trailed over me with disdain from head to toe, and I fought the urge to squirm in discomfort.

"Yes?"

I shifted from one boot to the other, studiously ignoring Gloam's intense stare boring into the side of my masked face. "I… I have a proposition for you."

I was going to throw up. The thought had popped into my head over the last few days, but the idea of it was so unnerving that I hadn't lingered on it too long, determined to find another way.

Unfortunately, I was pretty sure there was no other way. I'd run out of time here. They were going to leave.

Mary's interest had been piqued. She no doubt thought I was going to offer up Aury, in secret, in exchange for something. "What's that?"

I let out a shaky breath I hoped she didn't hear. "Au—The rycke is gone. He's not in the camp anymore."

Anchor was going to tell her in a few hours anyway, so sharing it with her now wouldn't matter—they were days away. I felt so dirty, using Aury to make her trust me even a little, but I didn't have anything else.

Mary's spine snapped straight, but then she narrowed her eyes at me in suspicion. "I don't believe you."

"I'm telling you the truth." Ghost had told me once that I had an honest face—although it was half-covered right now—and that people tended to trust me. Mary was still suspicious, but I could see the doubt creeping over her features.

“He left a while ago, at night,” I told her. “We have no idea where he is now. He’s long gone. But that wasn’t what I wanted to talk to you about,” I added hastily, tripping over my words. “I wanted… I want to come with you. When you leave.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw Gloam’s big body stiffen entirely.

Mary was distracted, face growing red at the idea that she may have been outsmarted by a beastie and a bunch of raiders.

“Come with me? What do you mean?” she snapped.

I swallowed, my throat achingly dry. “I want to work for you. With your… collection. I can help out around the menagerie. I’m good at fixing stuff. All kinds of stuff. I can help. I can… I can help look after the monsters. Whatever you need.”

She focused on me properly, pale eyes intense.

“And why on earth would you want to do that, pet?” Her sickly-sweet voice was back. She huffed, waving a hand toward the camp wall. “Not that I imagine it’s particularly *pleasant* living inside that monstrosity.”

“I just… I want to move on. It’s boring here. I have skills that I can’t use. And your… your collection sounds interesting.” I felt sick even pretending to not be horrified by what she was doing.

Mary’s head cocked, but her eyes brightened.

“It *is* interesting,” she said with enthusiasm. “And… I suppose it is rather hard to find good staff out here. Or any staff, for that matter…”

I held my breath, heart pounding as I waited in silence. When I chanced a look up at Mary, she was still watching me. The gleam in her eyes made me feel incredibly uneasy.

“Alright, pet,” she eventually said, and my stomach felt like it fell out of my ass. “You can come and work for me.”

The hard breath escaped me in a rush. I hadn’t… A part of me hadn’t actually expected her to *agree*. This had been a desperate last measure. A final stab in the dark to try and do *something* for these beasties before they were gone forever.

But it had worked. For some reason, it had worked.

I was going to be leaving with Mary and her pets.

Part of me wanted to ask her why. Why she had agreed—why she was willing to let me tag along. Did she *really* want me working for her? Or was it something else?

I wasn’t sure I wanted to know the answer to that.

Swallowing hard, I nodded once.

"O—okay. Great. Th—thank you." I forced the words out.

"But, of course, we won't be leaving until I know for certain that the rycke is *actually* gone." Mary's head turned to look into the depths of her RV. "Come here, precious."

I took a step back when her creepy pet skittered into view, legs shivering with eagerness.

"Shall we see if you're lying, pet?" Mary said to me, picking up the horrible red creature and setting it on the ground outside the RV. "Go and have a look, sweetness. Find the monster for mommy."

My breath caught when it shot off with an excited rattle, heading straight for the camp wall.

"What is it doing?" I asked, horrified as I watched it reach the wall and start scaling it impossibly fast, its little two-clawed hands piercing the metal.

Mary smiled at me sweetly. "He's just going to check for me, pet. Give your camp a quick scout. I've been very polite and patient, not wanting to intrude, but if you all truly let the rycke sneak out then I think all bets are off, aren't they?"

Fuck. I froze for a second, then turned and ran, sprinting back to the camp entrance as fast as possible. The creature couldn't get inside the camp, thanks to the chicken wire roof I'd constructed years ago, but it was still going up there. And I hadn't inspected that roof for ages. There could be holes, or patches that had broken apart. That thing was small and light enough to walk into the centre of it and, if it found a gap, drop directly into camp.

I was panting as I scrambled up through the containers as fast as possible. When my head emerged through the hatch, I looked around frantically. The raiders up here were already shouting to each other, and I could see the creature skittering across the chicken wire, peering down excitedly into the camp.

Raiders down below were staring up at it, pointing. One of them shouted to go and get Lilac.

I pushed myself out of the hatch and straightened on wobbly legs. Nun was to my left, trying to aim her crossbow at the thing, but it was darting about too fast.

“What will that woman do if we kill it?” she asked through gritted teeth, and I could do nothing but pant with fear in response.

What *would* she do? Send Gloam in here to destroy everyone? He would get hurt if that happened, not to mention all of us would die. Even if Lilac couldn’t kill him, he’d damn well try—I knew that already.

“It’s not worth it,” I finally burst out. “She’ll get Gl—the aytorin to kill all of us. Don’t shoot it.”

“Got it!” Cutter’s voice sent terror streaking through me, and I turned to see him holding the wriggling creature up by its back legs. “Little fucker.”

The creepiest thing was, it didn’t seem to be distressed at all, despite being held upside down in the air. Even from here, I could see its beady black eyes were gleaming, and its head was shaking continuously with that overexcited rattle.

I walked quickly along the wall toward them. “Cutter, let it go. It’s not worth it. Someone will get hurt if—”

I saw the creature twist in Cutter’s grip, and I saw its tiny, pointed mouth suddenly stretch horrifically wide into a perfect, gaping circle that revealed the never-ending ring of teeth swirling down its throat.

Then that mouth engulfed the entirety of Cutter’s free hand.

He screamed—an awful sound that made my shoulders hunch up to my ears—letting go of the creature’s legs and frantically jerking his arm to try and dislodge it. But it wouldn’t budge, not even an inch, and I felt bile rush up my throat when it bit down harder, and I heard delicate bones cracking and popping. Cutter’s scream sharpened, piercing my brain.

“Get it off me!” He stumbled back as I advanced, knowing I had to do something.

“Fuck, fuck,” I whimpered, my shaking hands stretching out, but then Lilac was barrelling past me.

He grabbed onto the creature’s middle and pulled without saying a word.

Mary’s pet didn’t let go, its legs shaking with glee, but Lilac pulled again, his wiry muscles straining, and its horrifying mouth slid down Cutter’s hand—taking half of it with it.

“Oh fuck.”

I retched at the sight of what was left. A raw, gory mess of ruined tendon and exposed, jagged bones. The skin was almost completely stripped off, but what was left had been shredded into ribbons by the thing’s teeth. Three of his fingers and half his palm were gone entirely.

Eaten by Mary's little pet.

Cutter was sobbing now, blood dripping onto the metal and all over his boots. Lilac must have gotten distracted by the sight of his hand, because the creature wriggled free and skittered over the side of the camp wall, back to its owner, with half of Cutter's hand in its mouth.

I turned, dazed, and stared down at the RV. Mary was watching from the bottom step, and even from there I could see her smile.

Gloam was an unmoving wall of tense muscle a short distance away, his caged head tilted up toward us.

"How is he?" I asked Anchor as I sat down beside her at the counter in the diner a few hours later.

Lilac was on her other side, carefully sharpening his machete. Probably preparing to use it on Mary's pets.

Fear momentarily froze me in place as I imagined him cutting through Gloam's grey, cabled skin with that deadly blade.

Anchor exhaled and ran a weary hand through her dark hair. "Apollo had to amputate what was left."

The blood drained from my face. "Shit."

Was this my fault? Mary had sent her pet up there because I'd told her Aury was gone. Would she have done the same if Anchor had relayed the news first?

I jumped, insides twisting with fear when Anchor spoke again.

"Nun said she saw you out there, talking to Mary just before it happened." Her eyes bored into mine. "What were you doing, Rig?"

Lilac stopped sharpening his knife to watch me carefully from Anchor's other side. Swallowing hard, I met his gaze for a moment before looking back at Anchor.

"I… I went to ask her if…"

Did I still want to go with them? After seeing what that thing could do?

Well, I didn't want to go with them *at all*. But I knew they would be leaving soon. Anchor would insist on it now that one of our campmates had been injured by Mary's pet. Which meant I'd never see Gloam again, and he and the borolesh would remain captured. And so would all the other beasties Mary kept in her menagerie.

“I asked her if I could go with her.”

Anchor stared at me blankly. Lilac’s eyebrow twitched—the only sign that I had surprised him.

“Go… with her?” Anchor sounded confused. “What?”

I squared my shoulders, even though on the inside I was shaking like a leaf. “I’m going to go with her when she leaves. I want to free her beasties.”

Anchor’s face remained nonplussed for another moment, before it twisted with fury.

“What the fuck are you talking about, Rig?”

I squirmed.

“I want to help them. I want to free them. And I haven’t figured out how yet, so I thought…” I trailed off, feeling stupid and pathetic voicing it out loud.

“So you thought you’d take off with a woman who *collects monsters as a hobby?*” Anchor hissed, her forehead turning ruddy.

Her bony brown fingers clenched into tights fists, the knuckles whitening. “Why are you so concerned with freeing them? They’re not your problem. They’re not *our* problem.”

I bristled. “That’s the point. No one else is going to help them.”

She spluttered. “That doesn’t mean *you* need to.”

“No, but I want to. I want to do this.” My voice wobbled only slightly, but Lilac’s green gaze sharpened on my face.

“It’s suicide, Rig.” Anchor reached over and gripped my arm too tight, her fingers digging in. “You can’t. You don’t know the Wastes like Ghost does. And who the fuck knows what *she* might do to you. Or her beasties.” Her face darkened. “We’ve all just seen what that thing is capable of.”

I could have done without the reminder. My gut roiled as the image of Cutter’s ruined hand blasted through my brain.

“I know. I’ll be careful.”

“You’re being a fucking idiot,” Anchor hissed through gritted teeth. “It doesn’t matter how careful you are, Rig. You’ll be completely vulnerable. And if you *do* somehow survive the trip and pull off this ridiculous stunt, you’ll still have to make your way back here alone. Across the Wastes.”

I shivered, pursing my lips at the thought.

“I know.” My voice trembled out of me.

Anchor let out a hard breath and gripped the edge of the counter. “I’m not letting you do this.”

Lilac cleared his throat. “You can’t actually stop him.”

She glared at him. “Shut up, Lilac.”

“You can’t though,” I piped up, buoyed by his quiet support. “I can leave the camp if I want to.”

Anchor’s forehead deepened in colour, and for a long moment she said nothing, just panted with impotent rage.

“Fine then,” she finally burst out, shoving out of her seat. “Go and get yourself killed for some beasties you don’t even know. Fuck all of us, right? Your family here, who love you and give a shit about you? Yeah, fuck us, Rig. Sure. Go off and indulge this little hero complex you’ve suddenly developed.”

I swallowed hard, the guilt I’d already been feeling for weeks swelling even larger. “It’s not about that, Anchor. I just—”

“Have you even *asked* Mary if she’ll free them?” She stared at me hard, bushy brows drawn low. “Have you even considered just walking up to her and seeing what she might offer in exchange for them? If you’re so fucking determined to do this, let’s try it, shall we?”

“What?” I scrambled up out of my seat as she stomped toward the diner door, Lilac smoothly following me up. “Anchor, what—what are you—”

As we burst out of the diner, Lilac slipped past me and grabbed her arm. “Stop.”

She tried to shake him off. “If Rig is so fucking concerned with freeing those creatures—”

“If you mention freeing them to Mary and she says no, and Rig goes with them anyway, she’s not going to trust him.” Lilac’s voice was flat, calm, but I could see him gripping her arm tight to stop her from stomping off. “*That* is more likely to get him killed than anything else.”

He looked over at me, green eyes steady. “What did you say to get her to agree, Rig?”

I licked my lips nervously, the tip of my tongue touching the damp leather of my mask. “I said I wanted to go work for her. In her menagerie.”

Anchor rounded on me. “And she said yes, then sent that fucking thing up onto the wall to maim one of us.”

“She… She wanted to see if Aury was still here,” I said faintly, guilt churning in my belly.

Anchor stared at me. “You told her he was gone?”

“I didn’t think it mattered,” I blurted desperately, feeling lower than I ever had before. “I heard you saying to Lilac that you were going to tell her in a couple of hours anyway, and I knew I had to do something. I didn’t know she’d send her pet up there.”

“You can’t blame Rig for what Mary’s pet did, Anchor,” Lilac said calmly. “And he’s right. You were going to tell her today anyway.”

“That wasn’t your call, Rig,” she gritted out.

“I know. I’m sorry.” My tone was pleading. “I’m sorry, I wasn’t—I just got desperate. I’ve been trying to think of a way to free them and I—I knew I’d run out of time. I just want to help them.”

“*Why?*” she shouted, her temper boiling over. “Why do you fucking care so much, Rig?”

“I don’t know.” My face was red. Other raiders were staring at us now. “Because no one else does? Because he—they deserve more than the life they currently have? *Someone* has to do something, Anchor. I can’t just leave them like that.”

She was breathing hard as she stared at me, as flushed as I felt.

“If he wants to go with them, you can’t stop him.” Lilac looked at me. “Rig understands the danger. He’s not a child. He’s smart. I think he’ll be okay.”

I thought I saw his eyes crinkle very slightly in the corners, as though he was giving me a small smile under his mask. “I think he’ll do it.”

His belief in me calmed some of the nauseating fear swirling in my belly. Lilac was the most level-headed person here. If he thought there was a chance I could actually free Mary’s beasties, it just made me all the more determined to do it.

“I should have known this was coming when you brought Aury back with you,” Anchor snapped, shoulders slumping as she reached up to wipe her forehead. Lilac released her arm and stepped back. “I *knew* that was you. I *knew* Ghost was too cautious to try a stunt like that.”

“Ghost wanted to help him too,” I shot back defensively. I didn’t like the insinuation that Ghost would have just left a poor, bound beastie behind.

“I’m against this,” Anchor announced, then pointed one knobbly-knuckled finger at Lilac. “When Ghost gets back and loses his shit, I want you to back me up. I was *against this*. *You’re* the one here gassing him up.”

Lilac quirked a brow and dipped his chin in a nod, watching impassively as Anchor shot me a final worried glance and walked off toward the motel.

As soon as she was gone, he stepped closer to me and pinned me with his intense stare.

“Going with them, then?”

I flushed. “I know, I’m sorry. I should have told you before, but I… I honestly didn’t even know I was going to ask her until I was already doing it. I panicked.”

“This is *really* dangerous, Rig. Anchor’s right. If you somehow manage to pull this off, you still have to come all the way back to camp across the Wastes alone. Are you prepared for that?”

No. I wasn’t prepared for any of it. I didn’t even know what I’d possibly be able to do to free them once we were out there, but at least I’d have more time to try and come up with something.

“I made it all the way from New Maryland when I got kicked out of the city.” My voice was faint, nothing like the cocksure tone I’d been aiming for. “I’m a little rusty, but I’ll be okay.”

Lilac gripped my shoulder. “Don’t hesitate out there, Rig. I know you don’t want to hurt anything, but your life is more important than some random beastie or wild animal you might come across.”

I knew he was right, but I still didn’t think I’d be able to follow his advice. My mind turned to Mary’s little red pet.

“What if that thing bites my hand off?” I asked fearfully.

“Just don’t swing it through the air like Cutter did.” Lilac’s tone was dry. “Any trapped animal is going to lash out in whatever way it can. What did he expect?”

I swallowed. “I guess that’s true.”

“Just don’t touch it.” Lilac looked over at me. “I’ve rarely seen it outside, anyway. It sleeps in the RV with her.”

“Yeah,” I croaked, thinking about the fact that I was soon going to be sleeping outside. On the ground. In the Wastes. In the pitch black.

Totally vulnerable.

Lilac watched me for a long moment before asking, “What does the caged beastie think of your plan?”

I thought back to the way his body had stiffened with shock when I’d made my offer to Mary. Then anger. He didn’t want me to go with them, I already knew. He’d already told me to not concern myself with this. That it was dangerous.

I didn’t like the thought of him being angry at me.

“I didn’t tell him,” I said to Lilac, my voice miserable. “So I don’t know.”

“Well.” Lilac straightened, finally sheathing his machete, which he’d been loosely gripping this whole time. “You’ll find out soon enough, I suppose.”

“Yeah.” I looked over at the camp wall, as if I’d somehow be able to see Gloam through the thick layers of solid metal. Standing out in the Wastes, silent and unmoving. Chained up and unable to speak because of the cage that a sick, twisted human had placed on his head.

I was terrified, and I knew there was a high likelihood I was going to die out there, but in a way—beneath the churning fear and guilt making me feel sick—I was at peace with my decision. It was the right one.

I was going to help Gloam and Mary’s other captured beasties. This could be the one good thing I did with my life. I refused to fail.

No matter how impossible it felt.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

“Will you keep my tobacco plants alive for me?” I asked Lilac the next morning.

We were in my room, and I was adding the last items to my duffle as I tried to ignore the intense jittery feeling in my gut that hadn’t gone away for even a second.

Lilac didn’t straighten from his arms-folded slouch against my wall as he watched me.

“Mm,” he said noncommittally, so I stopped packing to glare at him.

“You can keep anything alive.” I let out a humourless snort at that. “Well, any plant. Come on, man. They’re hard work—which I know isn’t selling it—but you like a challenge. I’ll be sad if they’re dead when I get back.”

If, my brain hissed at me, stiffening my limbs. *If you get back.*

There was every chance I’d die while doing this. There were too many things that could kill me in the Wastes. Beasties. Thirst. Starvation. Infections or injuries. Even Mary herself, if she got bored with me. I remembered Ghost telling me that she had a gun in her RV. And then there was her bloodthirsty little pet…

I kept asking myself why I was doing this. Why I was risking my life for a few beasties I didn’t even know. This was practically suicide. I hated the Wastes, hated going outside the camp walls. I’d gotten soft, my reflexes slow and sluggish, and I froze up at the slightest hint of danger.

“Why don’t I gift you a plant from my collection to replace them?” Lilac’s head turned to look at the tobacco plants, his green eyes disdainful above his plain black mask. “One that you can’t dry and smoke and ruin your lungs with.”

“Because I *want* my lung-ruining plants.” My tone was exasperated as I double-checked the contents of my bulging duffle.

Among the items were two notebooks for me and Gloam, several pencils, my tobacco tin filled with the last of my pre-rolled cigarettes, a change of clothes, a small first aid kit, my canteen and my rotary blade. That last thing was the most important, because it would be what I used to

get those rings out of Gloam's spine, and that cage off his head. Somehow. Without Mary realising.

I also had a solar lantern tied to the handle of my bag, and the package of food prepared by Daisy and Bo. I didn't know how long it would last me, and I supposed I would have to quickly learn how to hunt or forage. I'd never done it—other raiders in the camp had that job. The thought made my stomach clench.

My pipe gun was already slung over my back, and a short blade from Lilac was tucked into my belt. I was, frankly, petrified at the thought of coming across any other beasties out there, wild ones that might try and attack or eat me.

The idea of it made me think of Ghost, and I tried to ignore my burning eyes as I peered into my duffle, pretending to search for something so Lilac wouldn't see. What if I died out there and never saw him again? What if our last conversation was that tense, awful one in the diner with Anchor, when Aury had told us that every time Ghost headed into the Wastes, he'd been running for his life from beasties? I'd woken up the following morning with his key slipped under my door—which I'd already passed on to Lilac, seeing as I was leaving too—and Ghost and Aury already gone.

I was so ashamed of how much I'd wilfully ignored, blocking out what it was really like out there whenever Ghost had to go on scavenging runs or to appease Anchor's reckless desperation to find Cat. Sure, he'd never mentioned the times he'd been nearly hurt or killed, but looking back now with that knowledge, I could easily remember the occasions when he had returned to camp even more withdrawn and quiet.

I was a shitty friend, and I desperately hoped I made it back here so I could apologise once he and Aury had returned from the Topeka camp. So I could try and make it up to him, somehow. Maybe this trip would harden me, make me brave like him, or ruthless like Lilac. Maybe I'd be able to take over the scavenging runs for him, so he could live here in peace with Aury, without that worry.

I exhaled hard and straightened, zipping up my duffle.

"All set?" Lilac asked.

"I think so." My voice was wobbly with nerves, and I tried to ignore the fine tremble in my hands when I slung my duffle over my shoulder, feeling my pipe gun press harder against my back.

Lilac stepped closer. “You don’t have to do this, Rig. He’s not your responsibility. None of them are.”

“Who else is going to help them?” I turned to face Lilac, determination chasing away some of my fear. “I want to do this.”

He watched me in silence, arms crossed.

After a long moment, he said, “You might die out there.”

I flinched.

“Yeah,” I croaked. “I know.”

“Is it worth it?”

I thought of Gloam. Of his big, strong body, gentle hands and elegant handwriting. I pictured those rings piercing his spine and the cage encasing his head, hiding him from the world.

I didn’t know what was making me so fervently want to help him, but it was like a constant pull in my gut. A pressing need to see him free, even if only briefly before I returned to camp, to my usual life, and he went off to do his own thing. Probably reunite with his brothers, wherever they were.

I’d spent eight years failing my best friend. But he had someone now, someone who could care for him and look after him. Gloam didn’t.

I’d never liked seeing anything suffer, it had been the driving force behind my desire to help him in the first place. But now… now I wondered if helping Gloam, freeing him, might also make some of this churning guilt over Ghost disappear. Maybe it would absolve me, even if only a little.

I cleared my throat.

“Yeah,” I answered Lilac. “It’s worth it.”

He eyed me for a moment longer before dipping his chin in a slight nod and tilting his head toward the door. “Shall we, then?”

Lilac was escorting me out of the camp to make sure Mary didn’t try anything before setting off. I was surprised she was actually leaving, but Anchor had reluctantly let her inside the camp—alone, blindfolded at first—to see for herself that Aury was no longer here. Lilac had kindly accompanied her, casually twirling his deadly machete the whole time, and I’d seen for myself how pale she’d gone at the sight of him. It had filled me with satisfaction, even if only momentarily.

Besides, I suspected that even Mary—no matter how twisted her brain was—could see that a line had been crossed when her pet maimed one of us. She was probably fearful of retribution, particularly at the hands of

Lilac. She'd been furious that Aury had slipped out right under her nose, but she'd tried to hide it behind her creepy saccharine mask.

I'd wondered briefly, while she had been inside the camp walls alone, if Lilac was tempted to just kill her while she was vulnerable. He probably had been, but wouldn't do it without the nod from Anchor, which had never come.

Anchor was hovering by the container entrance when we got there, dark eyes tense and worried.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" she asked me, voice terse. "This is so dangerous, Rig. You have no idea what Mary or her pets might do to you once you're out there alone with them. Not just that little one. The big one too."

I bristled at her insinuation that Gloam would hurt me. "I'm sure. I'm going."

I was going to do something useful outside of these camp walls for once.

"Fuck." Anchor raised her hands and tangled them through her dark, curly hair. "Ghost is going to kill me for letting you go when he gets back."

My lips quirked at that behind my mask, but I was too nervous to smile. He *would* be angry. And worried. So worried. I chewed the inside of my lip. I hoped his anxiety didn't get worse because of me.

I said goodbye to Anchor, and she gripped my shoulder tight, her dark eyes intense as she told me to be careful, to make sure I came back. I swallowed and nodded, not knowing if I was lying or not. My stomach was tight with nerves as Lilac and I left her behind and started walking through the containers to get outside.

When Mary's RV came into view as we rounded the camp wall, my eyes flew to Gloam, who looked even more tense than normal. I knew he wasn't happy about me coming with them. He was worried for me, too. Maybe I just had a knack for making people around me worry about my stupid actions.

I saw a flash of dark hair as Mary peered out of the window. A few seconds later, the RV door swung open and she descended the steps to the ground in her strappy sandals, that creepy pet cradled in her arms.

"So, you really are coming with us." Her voice was dry. "I do hope you're not expecting me to let you sleep in my motorhome."

As if I'd want to.

I managed to suppress my grimace and answered, “No. I’ll be fine out here.”

Gloam’s shoulders bulged as he squeezed his big hands into tight fists for just a moment. The chain rattled softly, and I wondered if any kind of movement hurt him. It had to, right? From the placement of those rings, I’d already surmised that they must—somehow—loop around his spine. The idea of it was horrifying. I couldn’t even imagine the agony getting them inserted must have caused him.

“If you’d be so kind as to place your bag on the ground so my aytorin can inspect the contents.”

Mary’s voice was back to sickly-sweet, and she ran long-nailed fingers over her pet’s smooth, domed head, scratching lightly. It chittered with pleasure, legs shivering.

I swallowed, feeling sick at the sight of it. I could still easily picture that tiny pinpoint mouth stretching impossibly wide, showing a vortex of deadly teeth ringing the interior, all the way down into its throat. I could still hear the grinding crunch of it turning Cutter’s hand into mulch.

Lilac was a silent presence just behind me, making me feel a little safer. I took the time to appreciate it, because he wouldn’t be there soon. Reluctantly, I pulled my duffle off my shoulder and inched forward to drop it closer to Gloam before stepping back.

“Open the bag,” Mary said, her watery blue eyes looking bloodshot in the sun.

Gloam slowly eased to his haunches and unzipped my duffle with long, thick fingers, then he went completely still, as though waiting for her next order.

“Remove any weapons,” Mary barked at him, still stroking the head of her little pet in a caressing touch at odds with her sharp tone.

Seemed she reserved her rancour just for Gloam.

Unbidden, Lilac’s low, flat voice rang out in my head. *Anything can be a weapon if you’re determined enough.*

But I was pretty sure that sentiment applied only to him. To someone with the bravery needed to kill when it was necessary. I didn’t have it in me to kill anyone, and that wasn’t what I was here for, anyway. However much of a better place the world would probably be if Mary was no longer in it, I wasn’t the person to make that happen. I just wanted to free these beasties.

Gloam suddenly stilled while perusing the contents of my bag. When his caged head tilted up and I felt his eyes on me, my face went bright red behind my mask. Maybe he *was* a mind reader then.

After a pause, he turned back to my bag and pulled out my rotary blade. I pursed my lips tight to hold back my protest when he examined it for a moment before tossing it away from us. I flinched when it shattered into pieces as it hit the ground.

That was to free you, you idiot! I shouted at him in my head, hoping he *was* a mind reader in that moment.

But I was panicking now. *Fuck*. I should have expected it. Of course Mary wouldn't have just let me come with her without making sure I wasn't a threat. And now I had no way of removing Gloam's cage or the rings in his back. What was I going to do?

Gloam straightened, stretching to his full, towering height once he was done rifling through my bag. He'd been careful to keep the notebooks out of sight, tucked away at the very bottom, I realised. My breath caught when he approached, so close I had to tilt my head back to continue staring at his cage. I jumped when his big hand snatched the blade from my belt and tossed it a short distance away.

"No need to throw anything else." Lilac's voice was dry as he jogged to pick up the discarded weapon. "I'll take this, and Rig's gun, if he really can't keep it on him."

"Of course he can't." Mary let out a tinkling laugh. "Don't worry, pet, my big oaf here will look after you on the journey."

I gritted my teeth, pulling my gun off my back and turning to hand it to Lilac.

He stepped closer and gripped it, but didn't pull away. His green eyes searched mine keenly.

"Are you sure you still want to go?" he murmured.

I thought I could hear just the faintest hint of worry in his voice.

I gave a jerky nod, and he finally stepped back with my trusty pipe gun in hand. Although, I actually had no idea if it was trusty. I'd never used it.

I nodded at it with a small smile, trying to make myself less tense. "You're free to use that."

Lilac huffed and slung it over his narrow shoulder. "No thanks. I don't have a death wish."

A tiny laugh snuffled out of me, but it was smothered quickly when I felt the Mary's sharp eyes on my back. Gloam was still standing silently behind me, but his presence didn't bother me. Neither did the borolesh.

It was her. She felt like the dangerous one among this group. Her and her little pet, still cradled in her arms like a baby.

Before turning back to face them, I fumbled in my pocket for my room key.

"Here." I handed it to Lilac, trusting him to keep it safe on the off-chance that I made it back and would need it.

He took it without a word, slipping it into his pocket. For a brief, pathetic moment, I wished that he was a hugger, because I could have really done with a hug before I left. I wished Ghost was here.

I knew better than to launch myself at Lilac, though, so instead I just dipped my chin in a nod. "I'll see you soon."

His brow twitched. "Make sure you do."

Exhaling hard, I turned back to face Mary and Gloam. The sight of him calmed my pounding heart just a little, enough to give me the courage to step closer to him and away from Lilac, leaving the camp behind.

"Let's go," Mary barked, turning and clomping up the steps to her RV, the chittering red creature cradled in her arms. "Get them moving. We're leaving."

My breaths were whistling out of my nose, too fast and hard, as I picked up my bag with shaky hands and slung it over my back. The weight of my pipe gun was conspicuously absent between my shoulder blades.

Gloam clicked at the two borolesh, and I cautiously fell into step beside him as the RV started to roll forward. The two big beasties angled left after a second clicking signal from Gloam, and soon we were facing away from the camp, heading west.

I felt sick as I allowed myself one final glance back over my shoulder.

Lilac was still standing there gripping my pipe gun. Strands from his high ponytail moved gently in the breeze, and the camp wall loomed behind him like a rusted grey fortress as he watched me leave.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

What the fuck had I done?

I swallowed hard, trying to ignore the regret pounding through my blood as I walked in silence next to Gloam. Ghost had always said I was too impulsive. But this hadn't *felt* like me being impulsive. I'd had weeks to try and think of a way to free Gloam. Maybe asking Mary if I could come with her *had* been a snap decision, but I'd run out of options at that point. If they'd left, that would have been it. Gloam would have been gone forever and I would have driven myself mad wondering what had happened to him.

I couldn't stop shivering, though, even though it wasn't particularly cold. I couldn't tell if the enormity of what I'd done had finally sunk in, causing this reaction, or if I was in some kind of shock from leaving my entire life behind. Maybe in a few hours I'd have a total meltdown.

My eyes kept darting around us. I was convinced some giant, terrifying beastie was about to appear and rip me to shreds. What if something crept up on top of the RV from the other side, silent and skulking, before dropping onto my head like a bird of prey? What if there was some kind of huge, burrowing death-worm beneath our feet right now, and one wrong step would wake it up and cause the earth to swallow me whole?

You're going to die out here. The thought was fairly hysterical, and my breathing sped up as it crept into my mind and refused to leave. *You're going to get eaten, or Mary's going to shoot you, or you'll run out of water and die a slow, agonising death from dehydration. You're not prepared to be out here. You can't handle it. You're not Ghost.*

How the fuck did Ghost do this all the time? I'd only been out here a couple of hours, I wasn't even alone, and *nothing had happened*, but still I was petrified. Ghost did this all on his own constantly. It had taken a lot to get me to go with him to the Nebraska military base, where we'd found Aury, and I'd hated every fucking second of it. The brief time he'd left me and Aury to jog ahead to camp had been awful, and again—I hadn't even been alone. I'd been with a big, winged beastie who'd already protected us once.

I remembered Ghost asking me if I wanted to go back with him, when Anchor told him he had to return to the base to look for anything that could

lead us to Cat. I cringed now as I thought of the tiny, hopeful lift in his voice—the hope that maybe he wouldn't have to go back out there alone to the place where we'd found a beastie already, and there was a half-eaten soldier on the ground that he'd had to move because I was too pathetic to do it. I'd brushed him off so easily, telling myself he was used to it.

But no one could get used to that, no matter how much they had to see it.

It just made me realise how woefully ill-prepared I was to be out here. I really, really fucking hoped Gloam would at least try and help if anything bad happened to me on this journey. But that wasn't his responsibility. *I* wasn't his responsibility. I had shoe-horned my way into this fucked up little group, and it was wrong of me to assume that meant he would step in if I was in danger.

I still hoped he would, though.

I also suspected he would, anyway. I knew I hadn't spoken to him *that* much, but his general vibe told me he was good. Steadfast. Patient and solid. The glimpses I'd seen of him caring for the borolesh told me he was protective of them, and empathetic to their awful situation even though he was in the exact same one himself.

Gloam was a good person. Better than me. Far, far better than the evil woman currently lounging in her cushy motorhome while we walked outside it, exposed to everything in the Wastes.

Mary hadn't spoken to us once or even poked her head out of the window to check on me since we'd set off. Not that I was deluding myself thinking she gave a shit. I was still shocked—and mildly suspicious—that she had let me come. But, like she'd said, "good staff" were probably hard to find out here, and it wasn't like people were clamouring to leave the "safety" of the coastal cities.

The silence out here, and the inability to *do* anything but walk, was making me retreat too far into my own head, making me anxious and restless. When I got anxious, I normally rambled, but it wasn't like Gloam could answer me, and I was wary of saying anything about myself that Mary would overhear.

I could hear the faint strains of music playing on the record player Lilac told me she had in there. I hadn't heard music in so long, and it was something I hadn't even thought about for years. But now that the low melody of an old song my mama had liked filled the air out here, so out of place, I was hit with a near crippling wave of homesickness.

I still missed my mama so much. And my abuela, but I knew she would be gone by now. I'd barely gotten a chance to say goodbye before I'd been shunted out into the Wastes. I knew that there were secret ways into the cities that traders used, and for the first few years out here I'd seriously considered sneaking my way back into New Maryland to go and see them.

But I'd been too scared. Too scared of the journey back—one I'd barely survived by the skin of my teeth before I'd found Ghost further north, all those years ago—and scared that the military would immediately recognise me and do something worse to me for returning. I didn't know how thorough their records were on the 'criminals' they abandoned in the Wastes. I didn't know if there was a more severe punishment for being caught in a protected city once you'd already been banished. We'd all heard the rumours out here. Of the military throwing criminals into monster nests, or spiriting raiders away in the dead of night to never be heard from again.

Apparently, the tear to the monster world—where they'd all come through two decades ago—was located somewhere to the south. Supposedly, the military had been seen by nomads and traders, transporting screaming people in the backs of trucks in that direction.

The traders who passed through our camp had all kinds of wild stories of shit happening out here, and I was the type to easily get sucked in. My abuela had had a healthy fear of the paranormal, so I'd grown up believing in ghosts and demons, even though my mom was far more sceptical.

When the monsters had come, it had confirmed to my young brain that my abuela had been right all along. As I'd grown older, I'd become convinced that she was the smart one, refusing to rule out the possibility of anything strange, because the reality of it was playing out in front of our eyes. We were living through it. Strange was the new normal.

That had never been more apparent than as I travelled through the Wastes with a big, grey beastie with a cage on his head and a gigantic war hammer, and two huge drooping creatures being forced to pull an old RV for a woman who collected monsters as a hobby. With the military as her partners in crime.

I had to say something, fill this agonising silence, or I was going to lose my mind thinking about my mama and my childhood and the very real possibility that I was going to die out here.

"I know you didn't want me to come." I kept my voice low, but I didn't think Mary could hear over the music in her RV anyway. "I won't be a

burden, I promise. I just want to help you."

I whispered the last part, darting a nervous glance toward the vehicle moving slowly beside us.

I knew Gloam couldn't answer, but I looked up at him as his caged head turned toward me. I wished I could at least see his eyes, but they were just shadows in the tiny slit of his cage that let him see.

"I just need more time to work out how," I continued, wondering how his voice would sound if he could speak back to me. "But I *will* work it out."

Gloam said nothing, obviously. Eventually, he turned to look back in front of him as we walked. And walked.

The drag of his war hammer along the ground was a constant low vibration that I could feel through my boots. I wondered how heavy it was. I wondered if it was his, or if Mary had given it to him to protect her with. I wondered why he didn't just smash her face in with it.

The fact that he hadn't sent my mind spiralling down an endless vortex of possibilities, of ways she was keeping him captive and subservient. He'd mentioned he had two brothers who he'd come here with. Was she holding them hostage? Threatening to hurt them if he didn't submit? Were they part of her monster menagerie?

I was suddenly desperate to ask him, and I chanced another quick look at the RV before whispering, "Does she have something over you? Is she threatening you with something if you don't obey her? Does she have your brothers held captive?"

Gloam was tense beside me, his thick arm twitching. His head gave an almost imperceptible shake, telling me no.

I slumped. I'd already wondered what I'd do when—if—I made it to Mary's place and saw all the other monsters she was keeping there. I knew I'd be compelled to try and help them too. I wouldn't be able to just leave them there, locked up, but considering it made my head hurt. It was too much—too much pressure, too much responsibility that I was, for some reason, piling on my own shoulders.

I had to concentrate on freeing Gloam first, and the two borolesh. Then maybe Gloam would be willing to help me free the others.

I didn't know what we would do about Mary, though. I paled at even the thought of killing another person. I couldn't do it—I just knew it. I didn't

have it in me. I wasn't Lilac, who could switch off entirely to get the job done and keep us safe.

I wondered if Ghost had ever had to kill anyone while out in the Wastes, beastie or human. The thought made me feel ill. If he had, he'd never told me, and the idea that he had bottled that up and dealt with the mental aftermath all alone was heartbreaking.

How long was Mary going to make us walk? Did they ever stop? My stomach dropped with terror. What was I going to do if she just made Gloam and the borolesh travel constantly back to her place with no breaks? I hadn't even thought of that—I'd just assumed she would stop each night for… What? It wasn't like she needed anything out there. She had everything she needed inside. In the vehicle designed to be lived in while on the road.

Panic made my vision go spotty. How was I going to sleep? How long could I walk before I collapsed, totally exhausted? What if I had to fall behind every night to grab a few hours of sleep, then somehow try and catch up with them the next morning? I didn't know how to spot a safe place to rest like Ghost did. I was more likely to saunter right into a monster nest and die a painful death all alone out here, and no one would ever know what had happened to me.

God, I was *such a fucking idiot.*

I was still mired in thoughts of my impending doom when Mary poked her head out of the window, looming over us from above, after several more hours of walking. The sun had just set, so the sky was that weird glowy purple that made it hard to focus my gaze. I was already exhausted.

"Get them to stop," she ordered Gloam.

He quickly obeyed, clicking his signal at the two borolesh, whose lumbering steps slowly drew to a halt. His caged head turned toward me when Mary vanished back inside, and I could feel the concern coming from him. I knew I was a mess at this point. I was sweating, even though it wasn't hot, and I felt grimy from the dusty air coating the top half of my face. At least my mask meant I hadn't been breathing it in.

My feet hurt like a bitch. I was pretty sure there was a big, fat blister on my right heel, so I was trying to keep some of my weight off that leg to prevent it from rubbing and getting worse. My stomach was a tight, shrivelled knot, well past the point of hunger. I'd been able to sip water all day, but my canteen was running worryingly low.

“Are we stopping for the night?” I asked Gloam in a whisper.

The relief that coursed through me at his slight nod made me weak.

Once we were at a complete stop, the RV door swung open with a sharp squeal, making me jump. I was too jittery. I shot Gloam an embarrassed glance, but he had already moved to stand by the borolesh and was stroking the nearest one’s flank with a soothing hand.

“The water tank is running low,” Mary barked as she stepped onto the ground and leaned down to release her chittering red pet.

It shivered, head rattling, and bounded away. I hoped neither of them noticed the way I stumbled back to avoid it, convinced it was going to run straight up to me and tear off my hand.

Gloam hadn’t reacted to Mary’s words beyond a stiffening of his shoulders. His back was to us, the metal rings in his spine flexing slightly with the tightening of his muscles. My chest panged with sympathy. That had to hurt.

Mary bristled at being ignored.

“Go and get water to fill the tank,” she ordered him, and after a momentary pause, he slowly dropped his hand from the borolesh and turned to do her bidding in his usual silence.

My eyes got hot as I watched. Poor Gloam. Why did he listen to her? What did she have over him, if it wasn’t his brothers? Who else could he possibly have out here? I ignored the weird tightening in my gut at the realisation that, maybe, he had a lover or partner that she was holding captive instead.

I knew I had to ask—I had to rule out all possibilities—but I wasn’t sure I wanted to know the answer to that. Which was ridiculous. I was attracted to him, sure, but that didn’t *mean* anything. I was attracted to lots of people. I certainly wouldn’t have kicked Cat out of bed. Or Lilac—not that I knew if he was even interested in men.

But that didn’t mean I wanted *more* with them. Some people just didn’t fit together. Weren’t right for each other. I didn’t see how Gloam and I could fit. He was a kind, serious, intelligent beastie who didn’t even belong in this world. I was just… Rig. Not even Adam anymore. Just Rig. Good at fixing stuff. Good for a laugh.

Normally, anyway. I didn’t feel much like laughing right now.

I watched as Mary produced a key and moved to the thick metal ring that kept Gloam’s chain padlocked to the side of the RV. She unlocked it

and let the chain drop, already turning away, and my stomach tightened with excitement for a moment before I remembered—it didn't matter. Gloam had told me, in his own way, that the chain wasn't what kept him with her. It was just for *show.*

"Once you've done that, move the generator to the ground for the night."

I lifted my eyes to the solar generator humming away on the roof of the RV. It was brand new, military tech. An incredible luxury, and one the camp could have desperately done with. I knew there were places out in the Wastes that still had power and running water, but our camp didn't.

I wondered if a generator was one of the things Mary had offered Anchor in exchange for us handing over Aury. I hadn't been there for the conversation, instead remaining outside to have a whispered, hurried, one-sided conversation with Gloam.

I was sure Anchor would have been tempted. I was equally sure Ghost would have exploded into a fiery ball of unexpected anger if she'd accepted. Even then, he'd already been fiercely protective of Aury—enough to make him start speaking up just a bit more when he normally wouldn't.

Aury was good for him. I was so glad he had him. Ghost deserved all the happiness he could find out here, and if that was in the arms of a monster, then all the better. Aury may have been timid and equally as quiet as Ghost, but they just *fit.* Aury would look after him. Aury would care for him and make him happy. If I *did* die out here, at least Ghost wouldn't be alone.

I jumped again when Mary's little creature suddenly reappeared, only now it had a small, pinkish-beige animal with spindly legs flopping limply in its mouth. It wasn't a creature originally from this world, I was certain, and it had clearly just met its untimely death at the hands of this chittering burgundy nightmare.

"Good baby," Mary cooed, stepping aside to let it scramble up the steps back inside, its legs clattering against the metal.

Then she followed it up and slammed the door closed behind her.

I immediately approached Gloam, my steps hesitant.

"Can I help?" I whispered, watching uselessly as he opened the side compartment of the RV and pulled out a huge drum.

His war hammer sat discarded against the side of the vehicle, its immense weight denting the metal exterior. I noticed that he had wound his chain around his arm to stop it trailing on the ground.

His caged head gave a curt shake, but as he passed me with the drum, he briefly gripped my shoulder with a huge, gentle hand before letting go and walking off. I followed him anyway, because it suddenly registered in my brain—what Mary had ordered him to do. He was collecting water. I needed to fill up my canteen, and maybe wash up quickly if I could.

"Is she holding anyone else hostage?" I hissed frantically the moment we were safely out of earshot. "Not your brothers, someone else. A—a partner or someone?"

My stomach lurched when he shook his head, but I ignored it.

"So she's not threatening you with anything? That's not the reason you have to do what she says?"

Gloam's big body was incredibly tense beside me, his bulging arms wrapped around the drum. I could sense some internal struggle going on, like the other times he couldn't answer, but in the end he was able to give a tiny shake of his head.

I exhaled hard, my breath too warm within my leather mask.

"Fuck. Okay. I mean, that's good," I hastily added. "I'm glad you don't —That your loved ones aren't being kept chained up somewhere."

Gloam grew even stiffer, and his caged head turned slightly away from me, so I shut up. A moment later, I got distracted when I realised I could hear the sound of rushing water up ahead. My mouth went dry, suddenly desperate for a drink.

I wasn't going to even attempt to wash in the river, I decided as it came into view. It had only been a day. I could cope. I would have to get used to washing way less than I could in camp. Besides, the thought of Gloam standing there while I stripped off and waded in made my face unbearably hot beneath my mask. I knew he wouldn't be a creep, but still. It was way too soon for that. I was sure I'd have to eventually, though.

I filled my canteen while Gloam waded into the water and lowered the drum beneath the surface. I could see his thick, leather-encased thighs tensing with the effort needed to keep him still and steady as the water pummelled into him, rushing fast and hard downstream.

Once the drum was full, he heaved it up out of the river with a low grunt. His biceps bulged as he waded back onto land with the huge drum in his arms. Water splashed over the edge and trickled down his grey skin as we silently started walking back to the RV.

Gloam carefully set down the drum when we were back and pulled out a white hose from the open side compartment. There was a smaller, white-faced compartment next to it on the side of the RV, and Gloam opened it and unscrewed the plastic cap within, revealing the hole for the hose.

I cast a surreptitious glance up at the RV windows but couldn't really see anything inside from this angle. Just the off-white ceiling, with its dated, brass-ringed dome of a ceiling light, and the tops of small kitchen cabinets made of orange-hued wood.

Did Mary let that thing just *eat raw animal guts* in there? Wasn't she concerned about the carpets, or whatever flooring the RV had? Was it a graveyard of small animal bones inside? Although, I'd heard her pet crunching down on all the tiny bones in Cutter's hand, so it obviously just ate its prey whole.

Peeking back once at Gloam, I walked cautiously along the side of the RV to get a closer look at the borolesh. They were huge. Their skin was loose and saggy, rough looking this close, and those three horns on their heads curved high into the air. I kind of wanted to touch the one nearest, like Gloam had, but didn't dare.

The creak of straining metal caught my attention, and I turned my head to see the side compartment closed up, the water drum stowed away once more, and Gloam's big body climbing up the small ladder on the side of the RV.

My heart lurched with fear. Surely that couldn't hold his weight. I could practically *see* the thin metal steps bending under his heavy boots. He was going to fall and hurt himself. What if he landed directly on his back—on those thick rings piercing his spine?

"Wait." I hurried forward. "Let me. I'll do it."

Gloam paused, already near the top, and turned his caged head to peer down at me. He shook his head and continued up another step, then reached over and unlatched the heavy generator from whatever it slotted into up there and heaved it over to clear the roof, a long cable connected to it.

I watched, bouncing on my toes with anxiety, as he carefully descended the ladder one-handed. Once his feet were safely back on the ground, I let out a relieved breath and watched as he placed the generator beside the RV. Its constant hum was louder now, and I wondered why Mary had made him move it. Did he have to do that every night—climb up that tiny ladder and heave that thing down? Was it just a power move on her part—another

pointless task to remind him that she could make him do whatever she wanted?

My hands clenched into fists. She was horrible.

With no more tasks to do, Gloam stood there unmoving, and I suddenly realised—it would be just us now. All night. Assuming Mary didn't come back out and bark more orders at him.

Was she going to come and reconnect his chain? I'd never seen him free of it back at the camp, but he must have gone and got her water at some point while they were there. None of the other raiders had mentioned seeing it while keeping watch. She'd probably been careful to make sure he did it when the camp was quietest, because she was more vulnerable when he was gone, and some of the raiders—Cutter especially—were shit at actually keeping watch. None of them had spotted *me* going out there to talk to Gloam.

"What… what now?" I whispered to Gloam, taking a step closer.

I could feel him watching me for a moment, before he lifted one thick arm and pointed at the borolesh. I turned to eye them, frowning in confusion. What about them?

When I turned back to look at Gloam, he shifted his arm to the right, and I turned again to see him pointing at some trees nearby. It clicked. I'd seen the borolesh eating leaves. I'd seen Gloam move the RV closer to the treeline of the forest behind our camp, so they could eat.

Mary hadn't given him any orders to feed them. He did this on his own. He cared about them.

I trailed after him when he took off toward the trees, feeling awkward and useless, but I was also reluctant to stand there on my own where a beastie could jump out and grab me or Mary could suddenly emerge from her RV—with her pet.

Gloam reached up into one of the trees when we got to them and effortlessly split off a huge branch, sagging under its own weight and covered in big green leaves that rustled with the movement. He did the same with a few more branches before turning around, his caged head giving a slight tilt to indicate it was time to walk back to the RV.

I watched as he carefully placed the armful of huge branches in front of the two borolesh. One of them let out a soft warble, and they both started stripping the leaves from the wood and lifting them to their wide mouths in huge, strangely human-looking fists.

The sight of them eating made my stomach give a weak growl of hunger. I started heading toward the side of the RV with the intention of sitting down—at least partially out of sight of the windows—and eating from the package Bo and Daisy had given me. I jumped when the RV door swung open just as I was passing.

Mary ignored me.

"Come here," she barked at Gloam, already holding out an imperious hand. "Give me the chain."

He stiffened, then slowly walked over, already unwinding the thick chain from around his forearm. She snatched up the end of it and marched over to the padlock hanging from the thick ring that had been welded to the side of the vehicle. The snap of the padlock tethering Gloam once again to the RV made me wince.

Finally, those watery blue eyes turned toward me, and I hated the way I wanted to shrink back from her gaze.

Mary stared at me in silence for a long moment, until I had to stop myself from squirming. She gave me a slow smile.

"Sleep well, pet. Hopefully see you in the morning, if nothing gets you in the night."

Fucking asshole. The words were on the tip of my tongue. I was vibrating with anger. But all my usual bravado had fled.

It was much easier to mouth off in defence of Ghost back at camp, when Cutter treated him like shit or Anchor asked too much of him. It was so much harder to talk back to this entity of pure evil in the form of an unassuming little human woman. Especially when she held all the cards out here.

So I stayed silent, and Mary turned to head back inside without another word. The slam of the RV door behind her felt final this time, and I suspected we wouldn't be seeing her again until morning.

Letting out a shaky exhale, I pulled my duffle off my back and slowly sank to the ground at the side of the RV. As I took off my mask and pulled out some food from my bag, I looked up at Gloam, standing silently a short distance away.

"Are you—Do you want to come sit with me?" I asked quietly, my cheeks flushing.

After a moment, he slowly walked over. His knee brushed mine as he settled beside me, his posture tense and unsure.

This was a weird situation for both of us. We'd had a few brief conversations, and now we were going to be spending every waking moment together for however long it took to reach Mary's place back west.

"I'll try and be a good travelling companion out here," I whispered in a jovial tone as I unwrapped the pemmican Bo had made. "I promise I won't sing while we're walking—I have a terrible voice."

I held out the pemmican to Gloam. "Do you want some?"

I'd never seen him eat or drink. I knew Aury didn't need to, but the borolesh and Mary's pet clearly did, so I didn't want to assume anything. If he did, I doubted Mary cared about making sure he was fed.

Gloam shook his head. I eyed him suspiciously, not sure if he was just being kind and not wanting to take my food.

"Do you need to eat?" I asked.

Another headshake. I supposed I had to believe him, but I'd try again tomorrow, and the next day, until it was blindingly obvious whether he was telling the truth or not.

The food was good. The single bright spot on this otherwise shitty, nerve-wracking day. As I ate, I wondered if Gloam would want to speak through our notebook tonight.

I glanced up at the RV windows above our heads.

"Will it be safe to talk later?" I asked in a whisper. "In our notebook, I mean?"

He gave a slow nod, then pointed at my bag. I stuffed the last of the pemmican in my mouth and hurriedly rifled through it for one of the two notebooks I'd brought, extracting it and two pencils, one of which I handed to Gloam. My stomach tightened with anticipation at the thought of being able to speak to him properly, when he could answer.

I quickly unhooked the solar lantern from the strap of my bag where it had hung as we walked, and turned it on so I could see. It was almost pitch black now, and I didn't want to raise my eyes and stare out into the endless dark of the Wastes. It creeped me out enough when I was keeping watch on the camp wall at night. Now I was sitting right in it.

Gloam took the notebook from my hand gently, then flipped past the first few, already filled, pages with long grey fingers until he found the first blank spot.

She won't come back out again now. She is in for the night.

I sagged in relief, glad to see the back of her for a few hours at least, even though she hadn't emerged from the RV all day. It just felt different, knowing she wouldn't suddenly slam her door open and demand Gloam do something for her.

Good, I wrote back. *I hate her*.

Gloam's low rumble of amusement warmed my belly more than the food. I smiled over at him, even though he couldn't smile back, and took a sip of water from my canteen while his head bent low as he wrote something.

You shouldn't be out here, Adam.

I flushed, swallowing my water with an audible gulp.

I'll be careful, I wrote. *I'm sorry I didn't tell you before. It was kind of a snap decision to ask. I knew we were running out of time.*

He didn't move for a long moment, then dipped his head again as he wrote more.

I'm sorry about your weapons.

I softened, feeling the last of my lingering resentment that he had broken my rotary blade flee. I hadn't even *started* thinking about how I would free him without it, too distracted by the terror over what I had done by leaving the camp behind and coming out into the Wastes with Mary.

It's okay, I wrote back.

Gloam's caged head dipped lower, shoulders creeping up into an almost shy pose as he scrawled more words.

I will protect you. I won't let anything hurt you.

I went past the softening stage to melting entirely, like butter in a hot frying pan.

I know. I trust you.

I wasn't sure why I did, but I did.

I couldn't help but add, *But can you protect me from Mary?*

His hand spasmed around the pencil, and his shoulders hunched up further. He didn't move for a long time, and I could tell he was trying to think of a way to answer me with an actual answer.

I don't think she wants to hurt you, he eventually wrote.

Seeing it written down, in Gloam's jagged scrawl, made some of the tension in me ease. I didn't see why Mary would want to hurt me—what she'd gain from it—but she was clearly a terrible person. And serial killers existed. People who murdered others for pleasure. I was paranoid enough to

wonder if her false, saccharine front was just that: a front to cover up the bloodthirsty murderer lurking inside that unassuming package.

There was also the very real possibility that she planned to throw me into her monster menagerie and let her captive beasties eat me alive when we got there. Like I was a gourmet take-out meal, hand delivered by their sadistic owner from all the way across the Wastes. *Fresh raider! A Mexican American fusion meal for all you caged creatures!*

Maybe she'd get a live audience in to watch it. Maybe they'd pay extra to see a human consumed in front of their eyes.

But if Gloam said he didn't think she wanted to hurt me, I believed him. Although, I very much doubted he knew what sick plans Mary made in her head, any more than I did. He was completely at the mercy of her whims.

Just like I was, now.

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CHAPTER NINE

Mary made Gloam do everything for her.

We had to stop each night—not that I was complaining about that—because the motion of the moving vehicle made her feel sick while she was trying to sleep, she said.

Every evening, she ordered Gloam to move the generator from the roof to the ground, because the hum of it vibrating through the ceiling kept her awake. Then, if she was running low, she ordered him to collect fresh water for the RV's tank with that huge drum, his arms bulging with the effort of carrying it when it was full. Again, I wasn't complaining, because it meant we often stopped by rivers and streams, so I didn't go thirsty and was able to hastily get clean and scrub my spare set of clothes, wearing them in rotation. I draped them over my duffle to dry as we walked during the day.

After that, Gloam had to hunt for her dinner—and sometimes her little pet's if it wasn't inclined to go and catch its own. He started bringing back extra for me when my food package ran out.

His chain came on and off the side of the RV repeatedly, at her whim. He had to wind the heavy length around his forearm to stop it trailing over the ground—potentially catching on something that would pull at those rings through his spine—before he left to do her bidding.

While she ate within the comfort of her motorhome, he had to empty the vehicle's septic tank if it was full. The indignity of it all filled me with rage on his behalf.

Maybe I was just reading too much into it, because I studied every interaction between them keenly, but I noticed that everything she made him do was a direct order. *"Get me this. Do this. Find me this."*

Maybe she was just bossy. Well, she obviously *was* bossy, with a definite sadistic streak at the sight of this huge, powerful creature bending to her will. I'd always been a bit of a conspiracy nut, soaking up the outlandish tales traders told us when they passed through our camp, so I had a tendency to look for things that may not have been there. But I couldn't dismiss any of my suspicions just yet. I still knew too little to write off any theories about how she'd captured him and was keeping him under her control.

During the days, we walked for endless miles while Mary sat in her RV, listening to music on her record player and reading. The scent of her cigarette smoke wafted through the open window, taunting me, making my insides buzz restlessly with the need for a nicotine fix. I'd run out of my pre-rolled cigarettes days ago, having foolishly chain smoked them thanks to nerves during my first few days out here.

At least she tended to sit on the far side of the RV, away from us, which meant if she was listening to music and there was no fear of her hearing me, I talked to Gloam.

He obviously couldn't answer—we couldn't risk Mary seeing our notebook—so I talked aimlessly about anything I could think of. My life in New Maryland as a kid. How I ended up in the Wastes, getting kicked out of the city for stealing parts from the mechanic I was apprenticing with when I was just seventeen. A dumb as shit move, but I'd been able to sell a few of them to back-alley dealers, meaning my abuela, mama and I had been able to eat a little better that week.

I told him about life in the camp. About Ghost and Lilac, Apollo and Anchor, and our missing leader, Cat. I didn't talk too much about Aury, worried that he would somehow have to relay that information to Mary and reignite her eagerness to capture him for her menagerie. Not that he could speak, but like I said—I was a little paranoid by nature.

I bitched about Cutter for a while, because that guy was a total piece of shit, even if he had gotten his hand eaten by Mary's creepy pet. It wasn't that I'd wanted him to get hurt, but I was glad it hadn't happened to any of the others.

Once Gloam was done with his chores for Mary each evening—which he never let me help with, even though I tried repeatedly—he would build a small fire so I could roast my dinner over it while Mary lounged in her RV preparing for bed. He had a small, sheathed blade tucked into the side of his pants, and he would skin and gut whatever he'd caught for me, then skewer it to cook.

I was profoundly grateful, because the fear of not being able to find enough food out here had dogged me at first. I was under no illusions that Mary would have been willing to feed me or give me anything at all. I was pretty sure her opinion was that I might end up useful in her service if I survived the trip to her menagerie. Meaning, she didn't give a shit what happened to me. If a rabid beastie had appeared and torn me to shreds right

outside her window, I doubted she would have even looked up from her romance novel.

We saw them—beasties—all the time, but most avoided us, just wanting to be left alone themselves. Any that did get closer, curious about us, Gloam deterred with his huge war hammer. That wasn't enough to stop the intense fear streaking through me at the sight of one every time, though.

The borolesh rarely made noise. Occasionally one of them would let out a low warble that somehow sounded sad, but they never seemed to tire. I couldn't tell if they slept or not, because if they did, they did it while standing. Gloam tried to make sure they were near at least a couple of trees when we stopped for the night, but if we weren't, he would rip big branches from any he came across while off hunting and bring them back for the borolesh to eat, just like he had that first day.

Something in me softened at the sight of him caring for them. Caring for *all* of us. I hadn't thought he might be violent since our first conversation, but seeing him tirelessly do chore after chore for such a shitty person made my chest hurt. He deserved better.

For the most part, I managed to ignore the intense pull I felt toward him. But at times, when I was watching him prepare my dinner for me, or raise a thickly muscled arm to gently stroke the flank of one of the borolesh, it returned in full force, tightening my gut with a rush of *want*.

I didn't even know for sure what it was about him. I had initially found him weirdly attractive, sure, but it felt different now. Deeper. He was just so… solid and steady. Sure in every one of his movements, never faltering.

I'd had a brief, one-sided teenage crush on Cat when Ghost and I first joined his camp—when I was still gangly and awkward and too eager to please—but it had faded quickly after I realised he saw me more like a little brother than anything else. Maybe I just had a thing for strong protector types. Maybe that said something about me, or my childhood, or whatever it was that people liked to insist was the root cause for all of someone's issues and kinks and preferences. I didn't know for certain, and I didn't particularly care.

I still wasn't used to sleeping outside, in the pitch black. I'd never liked intense, total darkness. My first night after leaving with Mary, once Gloam and I had finished talking for the night, I hadn't slept at all. I'd just shivered all night in my sleeping bag on the hard ground beside the RV, Gloam a silent unmoving presence a short distance away.

Before I tried to sleep each night, Gloam and I would talk through our notebook. He had to listen to me ramble all day, unable to answer, so I tried to let him lead our conversations. He told me that his kind—aytorin—were one of the ‘old races’ in his world. They lived in a ruined city to the south that had fallen into disrepair as fewer and fewer aytorin were born, but those who remained were unwilling to move on and abandon their vast libraries.

He had travelled here with his two brothers. They were triplets. His kind were always born in threes, he said, and his people were led by Matriarchs, but fewer Matriarchs had been born over the last several centuries. It was why his kind was dying out. They lived in small groups, and when Matriarchs came of age, they went to live with another group so they could create the next generation.

Aytorin roamed their world, constantly hunting for new knowledge and languages to learn. They would record everything meticulously to take back to their city and preserve it forever in their libraries.

When the tear had opened up, Gloam and his brothers had been chosen to come to the new world, as they called it, to learn and record everything they could. But when I asked him what had happened when they got here, he couldn’t continue. His hand had spasmed around the pencil, and he’d shaken his head.

He must have had at least a few years, though, to learn before he was captured by Mary. He was intimidatingly articulate with his written words, his command of what had once been an entirely alien, foreign language to him was far better than my own—and I’d spoken English my whole life. He was so smart and eloquent, it made me even angrier that his spoken voice had been taken away from him.

I had tried to imagine what his voice would sound like more times than I could count. Low, I knew without a doubt, and deep, rumbling. Would it be smooth or raspy? What would his accent sound like, when he spoke my language? What did *his* language sound like? I imagined it would be flowing and musical, like water over rocks.

Those thoughts would normally turn to me wondering what he looked like beneath that cage. I couldn’t imagine his face at all. Was it humanoid, like Aury? Animal-like? Totally alien? Did he have a nose and two eyes like me? Or maybe one big eye, like a cyclops? Or dozens of small ones?

No matter how hard I peered into that tiny gap in the cage, I could never see anything but shadows.

Were his teeth sharp? Or big and blunt? Did he have those thick cables on his face as well, snaking over his cheekbones or down his chin? Did he have hair? If he did, what colour was it?

I was determined to find out the answers to all of these questions. I was determined to get that cage off him—to free him from Mary's humiliating control over him. I still didn't know how I'd do either of those things, but that wasn't going to stop me. When I set my mind to something, I was like a dog with a bone. My mama had always said that.

At the end of my seventh day out in the Wastes, after Gloam had finished all his jobs for Mary and she was lounging in her RV with a novel, we went to sit in our usual spot at the back of the vehicle, out of sight of the windows. Gloam had assured me that it didn't hurt him to rest his back against the RV, because we sat side by side every night, the solar lantern beside us so I could see, and talked to each other in our notebook.

What do you want to talk about tonight? he wrote.

I tried not to think about how long he must have gone without speaking to a single person, but his eagerness to talk, even this way, made it clear that he had been starved of conversation for a long time. For such an articulate, intelligent being, it must have been torture.

Pushing away the sadness, I thought about his question. I was tempted to ask him to tell me more about his world. He had already told me what it looked like—the part he was from, anyway—and I tried hard to picture pale pink skies, black-red glass and glowing purple crystals in the water.

I loved reading about it—a whole other world away from this one—and trying to imagine what it was like, because it distracted me from the pressing blackness of the Wastes beyond our little halo of light from the solar lantern. I was glad he wanted to talk every night, because I knew that otherwise, the moment it got dark, I would just lie awake in my sleeping bag, petrified that a monstrous face was about to loom out of the total darkness, inches away.

I had never been all that good at respecting people's personal space—not intentionally, I just tended to be a tactile person. Honestly, I had no idea how Ghost had put up with me for so long, because he was the opposite—keeping everyone but me at arm's length. But Gloam didn't comment on the way I would huddle right up beside him when we sat down to talk every

night. I was profoundly grateful, because the press of his big, warm body against my side chased away the chill and some of the fear of something unseen lurking nearby, waiting to pounce.

Can you tell me more about the Matriarchs? I asked him in the end.

I was fascinated by how his kind lived, in their big, ruined city filled with books and knowledge.

What do you want to know? Gloam asked.

How does it all work, with them leaving when they come of age to go to a different group? I'm assuming they're female, I added. *Is their role just to have babies?*

I didn't like the thought of Gloam coming from an outdated, sexist society—not that humans were any better—but it sounded that way, even if the Matriarchs were the ones in charge.

They are female, but we all look largely the same, he told me.

I cocked my head.

So how do you know which ones are Matriarchs?

There are some small differences. Females have mammary glands, because they do feed and care for the young. We require sustenance at first. But the Matriarchs don't carry the young. The males do.

I stared at his words for a long moment.

How does that work?

We all have the same genitalia. It is the females, the Matriarchs, who impregnate the males.

My head was spinning, and my face flushed as I wondered, just for a moment, exactly what kind of genitalia Gloam had. I had already, shamefully, snuck a glance or two when my mind wandered as I watched his big body move. But that wasn't my fault—he shouldn't wear such tight leather pants if he didn't want his dick print to be visible.

And it was visible. Very visible.

I cleared my throat and peered down at the page, still feeling too hot, when I realised Gloam had written more.

Our young don't grow very large in the body. When they are ready to be born, an opening forms naturally for them to be removed.

I looked up, and Gloam gestured at a thick, raised ridge that stretched between his hip bones, just visible above the line of his pants. Automatically, my gaze shifted lower to the bulge in his pants before I

could stop it. I flushed again and quickly looked back down at the notebook.

They are then given to the Matriarch, who cares for them and teaches them our ways as they grow.

Wow. I couldn't help but grin up at Gloam, excited to be learning more about him and his kind.

Do you have children? I asked him.

He shook his head.

When my brothers and I left for this world, we hadn't yet received a new Matriarch. Inbreeding goes against our morals, which is why the Matriarchs move to new groups when they are of age. When a Matriarch from another group arrives, she replaces the existing one.

I thought I understood.

Who would be your mother, I wrote, to make sure.

Yes. And there are fewer and fewer Matriarchs being born. We haven't had a new one for a very long time. Our mother is old now, too old to still be in charge, but there is no one to replace her. No one to create the next generation.

It was so sad. I didn't like the thought of Gloam's race dying out.

Do you have any idea why fewer Matriarchs are being born?

No, he replied. *We cannot figure it out. Perhaps it is just one of those things. We are one of the old races, which have been dying out for a while now.*

My interest piqued.

What other ones are there? Are any of them here?

Yes. Gloam's posture was relaxed, his fingers loose around the pencil as he wrote. His jagged, elegant handwriting was a comfort for me to read now, even though it made my own chicken scratch look even messier.

The last telyths have been coming here for millennia to kill parasites that infect humanity, though not many are aware of them.

Wait, what?

Parasites infecting humanity??? I wrote quickly. *What???*

Yes. There used to be very few of them, but they have flooded this world since the tears grew.

I shuddered hard. *How would I know if I'd been infected by a monster parasite??*

You wouldn't. You would grow very weak. You would struggle to hold food down. Your last memories would be either of immense pain, or seeing a telyth looming over you. Neither is particularly pleasant.

Despite the terrifying subject matter, I snorted.

Don't sugarcoat it, Gloam.

There was a pause as he deciphered my words and their meaning. Then he let out a low, amused rumble, and my stomach warmed with pleasure at the sound of it.

Any others besides parasite-hunting telyths? I asked.

I wondered what they looked like, but I didn't think I wanted to know. If I got infected with some monster parasite that had no cure, I'd rather die ignorant than spend my last days alive knowing an alien creature was living inside of me.

The last isdernuc wanders this world. I saw him recently, Gloam said. I had no idea what that was. *And, of course, the rycke.*

I tensed up at that. Aury. Right. But he had said he was only seven hundred years old—which, yeah, seven hundred was pretty fucking old for a human, but I hadn't thought it was all that old for some monsters.

But then, he was the last one. Moth had told us that. So that made sense.

I didn't know how safe it was to discuss Aury. I knew Gloam wasn't the one who'd wanted to capture him, but I was still wary. I tried to think of what else to ask him that would move the conversation away from that subject.

What is that creature that sleeps in the RV with Mary?

I hated the sight of it, especially now I'd seen what that tiny, pointed mouth could stretch into. I cringed when I remembered the wet crunching sound Cutter's hand had made as it was engulfed by that wide, circular mouth ringed in endless teeth.

A shulc, Gloam told me, shifting slightly, his warm, bare arm brushing against my jacket. *You have seen for yourself that they are more dangerous than they first appear.*

I shuddered, huddling closer to him, picturing that creepy thing sneaking outside while I slept and stripping the skin from my arm with its teeth.

Is it a baby? I asked Gloam, partly to distract myself, and partly because the idea that it could be might have made it a little less terrifying. *It likes being held like one by her.*

It isn't. She has just domesticated it. I don't know how. It was before I

Like many other times, his words stopped abruptly, that last letter ending in a slash as his fingers spasmed around the pencil.

That's okay, I wrote when he didn't move for long moments, head bent low. *We can talk about something else. Tell me more about your world. What are the cities like? Besides yours, I mean.*

Gloam slowly started writing, and I could feel my eyelids drooping as I contentedly tracked his words as they appeared on the page. I couldn't stop myself from dropping my head onto his hard shoulder with a sigh, trying to get closer to his warmth. I hadn't slept properly for days and days, and it was catching up with me.

He didn't try to move me, but I felt him stiffen for a moment, his hand stilling. I knew I should have lifted my head, apologised for being weird, but I was suddenly too tired to move. Then, against the side of my face, I felt him relax. For a brief moment, the hard edge of his cage brushed over my hair.

He resumed writing, the page filling with the jagged lines of his unique handwriting, but soon my eyes could no longer focus on the words. I thought I felt a big hand briefly brush over my knee, which was curled up and angled toward him to suck up the warmth from his thighs, before I fell asleep.

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CHAPTER TEN

The monotony of endless walking was killing me.

It didn't matter that I was seeing more of the Wastes than I ever had before. Most of it was bleak and depressing. Little towns empty and abandoned, with smashed windows and buildings being slowly engulfed by nature. Suburbs that still showed the remnants of humanity's former life, family vans sitting on cracked driveways and rusted playgrounds with rotten fencing.

We didn't pass through cities, instead skirting around the edges of any we approached. I wondered how many times Mary had made this journey across the Wastes from her home. How many monsters she had captured and locked up in her menagerie. I supposed I would find out soon enough.

Although, it was Gloam who directed the two borolesh, with several different clicking signals that he used to get them to turn, stop or start walking again when Mary was ready to move on in the mornings. He had obviously made this journey before, because the signals he gave the two beasties pulling the RV came to him effortlessly, like muscle memory, gently directing them to turn left or right when he needed them to.

Maybe he was the one who wanted to avoid the cities, not Mary. I didn't blame him if he did. They were eerie. Too big when they were empty. Too many places for things to hide—monsters or people. Or even the military, not that I had heard many rumours of them infesting the old cities. The towering apartment blocks and high-rise office buildings looked unnatural to me now, even though the ones in the coastal cities were taller, pushing architecture and engineering to their absolute limits to try and cram in as many people as possible. I was glad my mama, abuela and I had never had to live on one of the top floors of those impossibly tall buildings. It was only a matter of time before they toppled.

While the cities were too creepy and depressing for me to ever want to step foot into, some parts of the Wastes were surprisingly beautiful. Huge, looming forests that were overgrown and teeming with wildlife—of both the earthen and beastie variety. They seemed to live, for the most part, fairly harmoniously.

We passed lakes that glittered in the increasingly cool sunlight, crystal clear and way too cold when I washed in them, but I didn't have any other options, and I was grateful for the chance to get clean. Gloam watched from the edge when he could, keeping an eye on me, and his presence made me feel safe. The first time I'd done it, I'd later asked him if there were any beasties likely to be lurking in the water waiting to bite my balls off, and his amused rumble had made me go warm all over.

Every time we passed buildings, I wondered if there would be any tools left inside them for me to take, to try and cobble together something to get the cage off Gloam's head. I hadn't yet worked up the courage to ask Mary if we could stop, but as we passed around the edge of a tiny, single stretch of buildings, I spotted the rusted sign of an old hardware store. My gut clenched with fragile hope.

Swallowing hard, my throat dry, I glanced over at Gloam. He was walking silently beside me. The rough rasp of his war hammer dragging behind him the only sound over the faint strains of music coming from inside the RV.

I cleared my throat.

"Mary."

I had to speak up to make sure she heard me, and my jaw clenched hard after I said it, her name tasting bad on my tongue. I'd been able to get away without saying it until now—without directly addressing her all that much. She rarely left her motorhome aside from coming out to bark orders at Gloam or let her little pet out to stretch its legs and take a piss.

Gloam's head had snapped toward me when I spoke, and I saw his body stiffen with tension. I wanted to reach out and grip his arm, try to reassure him, but I couldn't risk Mary seeing.

A second later, her dark head poked out of the open window. She looked down at me from above, her lips pursed in a disdainful moue.

"What?"

I hated how nervous I was. "I—Can we stop for a minute? So I can go scavenge in those buildings?"

She stared hard at me with her watery eyes before she turned them toward the strip of buildings we were passing.

"What do you need to *scavenge?*" The way she said the word made it clear she thought I was some wild heathen.

“Food.” I just had to hope she hadn’t noticed Gloam feeding me every night. “And um, maybe clothes. My underwear is falling apart.”

It worked—a sneer spread over her face, as if I’d said something particularly vulgar. She waved a disgusted hand.

“Go on then. Quick. And the aytorin will inspect whatever you bring back, to make sure you’re not trying to sneak anything sharp,” she added, shooting me a tiny smirk.

I swallowed and nodded once, chancing only a brief look at Gloam. He stiffened even further when Mary barked an order at him to get the borolesh to stop. He clearly didn’t want to—didn’t want me going off where it may not have been safe when he couldn’t follow—and it almost looked like he was fighting the order for a long, tense moment.

In the end, he clicked the signal that drew the two lumbering beasts to a slow stop. Luckily, they were so slow-moving that we had barely made it past the tiny town. Gripping the straps of my duffle tight, wishing I had a weapon even if I didn’t want to use it, I jogged toward the two rows of derelict buildings, not wanting to give Mary time to change her mind.

A sudden realisation hit me as I got closer, and I berated myself for how long it had taken to click. I’d suspected, but it had felt too outlandish. Which… I mean… monster apocalypse. It was a little ridiculous to think of *anything* as outlandish these days.

Gloam was physically compelled to follow any direct orders from Mary. Somehow, when she barked one of her bratty demands at him, he was forced to do it no matter how much he didn’t want to. I’d seen him fighting it just now, trying not to obey her, but in the end he hadn’t been able to.

That was how she was controlling him. That was probably how she’d gotten that cage on his head, and those rings through his spine, and why he couldn’t escape, even though she unlocked that chain to make him go and do her bidding every evening.

I remembered what he’d written during our very first proper conversation, outside the camp walls.

‘I must protect her. From all.’

But he’d also made it clear he absolutely didn’t want to.

Did that mean she had *ordered* him to protect her? And that order influenced all others, forcing him to do it in whatever way the command manifested?

Was that why he couldn't say certain things? Because it might have led to the truth, which could have put her in danger?

I wanted to grin in triumph for finally—*finally*—figuring it out, but I was too tense as I reached the buildings. I hunched up at the realisation that I would have to step inside that old hardware store, with its broken windows and shadowed interior, all alone. No Ghost beside me, making me feel safe, scoping out the building before I even went in. Another pang of guilt hit me at the thought.

You can do this. Be brave. For Gloam. He needs you.

I squared my shoulders and slowed my steps as I made my way down the still, silent street. The asphalt was cracked and almost invisible beneath the weeds, the rubble of it crunching under my boots. I strained my ears for any tiny sound, but it was dead quiet.

I was almost vibrating as I slowly edged past the broken door of the hardware store. Part of me wanted to call out and ask if anyone was there, but I knew that was beyond stupid.

It smelled like rust and damp inside. The far corner of the small store had caved in, black mould spreading over the once white-washed walls in an insidious stain. I was grateful for the mask covering my nose and mouth.

The shelves were almost completely bare. I stood there for a moment, hopeless despair washing over me before I pushed it back and forced myself to step deeper into the dark interior. The place had been cleaned out by raiders over the years. I thought of Gloam, no doubt worrying about me as he stood helpless beside Mary's RV, those thick rings piercing his back and that cage on his head. I had to look. There might have been something, something no one else deemed valuable. That didn't mean I wouldn't.

This was what I was good at. Fixing stuff. Making junk into something useful. It felt like all my years of tinkering had been building up to this moment—this task—to help the big grey beastie who had been caring for me out here.

I knew I wouldn't have long—Mary wouldn't be patient with me, and I didn't want her to make Gloam come and drag me out of the building, because I knew he'd hate doing it. Or worse—she'd send that creepy fucking pet in here to get me. The sight of Cutter's ruined hand was still fresh in my memory.

I was sweating as I searched fruitlessly along shelves thick with dust, each one as empty as the last. Not even a single fucking box of nails

remained, and I could feel my face getting hot and red as I started shoving entire shelving units away from the walls, praying that some items had fallen behind or underneath and been missed. I didn't even care how much noise I was making anymore, desperately trying to find anything—any little fucking thing—that I could use.

Trying very hard not to cry, I finally gave up when I realised I'd already taken too long, and there really was nothing here. I'd even skirted past the thick crust of mould to the backroom, but it was as empty as the front. As I dragged my feet out of the shop and back onto the street, I wondered if I had time to run into another store. Maybe there was a general goods store that would have something, although I knew, deep down, that it would be as empty as this one.

I jumped violently when a sudden crash reverberated down the street, coming from the building at the far end. My breath caught in my throat, and I couldn't move. I was instantly frozen, eyeballs straining as I stared, searching for movement.

I jumped again when there was another crash, closer this time, coming from one of the buildings in the row facing me like a wall of neglected mausoleums. I started shaking, but I still couldn't get my feet to move. It was like my boots had been glued down, pure terror keeping me immobile.

The third sound made me jolt so hard I stumbled back, and it was like my body finally came back to life, and my feet were moving before my brain had even caught up. Hard, heavy footsteps boomed from one of the buildings opposite, getting closer and louder, and panic momentarily blinded me as I ran back toward the RV. My breaths were rough and frantic, heating the inside of my mask and making everything damp. My duffle slammed against my back with each pounding step I took, and I almost tripped over my own feet several times in my desperation to get back to the safety of Gloam's side.

His big body was already tight with tension as I rounded the buildings and sprinted back toward the RV as fast as I could. I didn't stop until I was beside him, gasping for breath and wishing I could cling onto him for safety. Mary watched me with disinterest from the bottom step of the RV door, one thin brow raised.

I shook my head, still panting.

"There's som—there's something living there."

“Is there?” Mary’s tone piqued with gleeful curiosity. “Well, I suppose we’d best see what it is.”

I stiffened, expecting her to order Gloam to go and find whatever inhuman thing had just made those noises from one of the buildings. What if it hurt him? It had sounded big.

But she didn’t.

“Off you go, pet.” Her voice was saccharine as she lowered the already squirming shulc in her arms to the ground. “Go find the monster for mommy.”

It shot off, making its unnerving chittering sound the whole time, head shivering with excitement. I swallowed uneasily. She wasn’t doing this to help me—to make sure I could go and scavenge for supplies. She was doing this because it gave her a sick thrill. I could see it in the gleam of her watery eyes as she stared avidly after her pet.

There was nothing but silence for long moments as we waited. The shulc had disappeared between the buildings, and I prayed it didn’t drive whatever was hiding in there toward us.

I jumped out of my skin when a burst of sound echoed out from between the buildings—a sharp, excited chitter from the shulc, followed by an inhuman, warbling cry of pain. Ten seconds later, Mary’s pet appeared from around a building, trotting back over to us.

With a dark green, rangy arm hanging from its hideous mouth.

My gorge rose, and I lifted a hand to cover my masked mouth, the damp leather pressing against my lips.

Mary just tutted without heat. “You silly thing. That could have been the latest addition to our collection.”

She didn’t scoop the creature back up, but bent down to stroke its head when it came to a stop beside her. It bit down on the arm and chewed happily, bones crunching, making me feel even sicker. The arm’s hand had three fingers and a thumb with wide tips and webbing between them, almost like a frog. I wondered what the creature it belonged to looked like. If it was going to survive or bleed out.

Guilt made me want to squirm. The creature wouldn’t have gotten hurt if I hadn’t been such a fucking baby. I bet Ghost would have just snuck his way through the buildings and gathered supplies without disturbing anything. Instead, I’d barrelled in there—potentially into the nest of something just trying to survive out here—and gotten its arm ripped off.

I was miserable as we set back off. I didn't even want to go back to scavenge the other buildings, which made me feel even worse. Whatever creature was in there had gotten hurt—maybe killed—for nothing. But I just couldn't stand the thought of going back and finding a bled-out monster on the ground without an arm. I wouldn't have found anything, anyway. I knew that, deep down. And even if I had, the odds were that Mary would have forced Gloam to take it from me.

I was still tense after another couple hours of walking. At one point, when he was sure Mary wouldn't see, Gloam had moved closer to me and briefly curled the fingers of his free hand around mine, the other dragging his war hammer behind him across the ground. I felt myself calm at his solid, comforting touch, and I squeezed his hand hard before he let go.

The sun was low in the sky, making me squint. It felt like we were walking directly into it, even though the air was cooling rapidly around us. When Mary finally made us stop for the night, I watched Gloam carry out all his tasks for her, and I became even more certain that my suspicions were correct.

He did the same chores for her every night. He knew the routine. But he would go completely still after completing a task, and I suspected that it was his only way of defying her. He could have gotten through his jobs much quicker if he had just got on with them all, but he still made her bark each direct order at him before he started the next. Like his own very subtle version of a big *fuck you*, making it clear that she hadn't broken his spirit.

As soon as we sat down for the night with Mary safely tucked away in her RV, I started scribbling in our notebook.

I think I realised something.

Gloam's caged head cocked as he read the words. He stayed still, waiting for me to continue.

I think you're compelled to follow any direct orders from Mary, I wrote, my gut clenching with the excitement of being right—of figuring it out and getting one step closer—when Gloam tensed beside me.

I mean I think you're PHYSICALLY compelled, I continued, my handwriting messier than normal in my haste to get the words down. *You HAVE to follow her orders. Something forces you to.*

I stopped writing and looked up at him. I didn't know if he'd be able to answer me. If I was right, any scrap of information that could lead to the

truth would go against his compulsion to protect her, making him unable to confirm it.

And I knew I was correct when he slowly wrote, *I cannot answer.*

That told me everything. In his own way—the only way he could—Gloam was letting me know that I was right. That somehow, he physically could not disobey her direct orders. I still didn't know how or why. It made me feel foolish to wonder if it was some kind of curse or spell she'd put on him, because like I'd said—despite the monster apocalypse and all—it seemed too unbelievable. Although, I could definitely believe that Mary was a witch. The evil kind from kids' movies I only vaguely remembered.

So it is a compulsion then. When she orders you to do something. Your body forces you to obey.

I cannot answer, he wrote, but his hand was trembling.

I was getting closer to the truth. I just knew it. The first puzzle piece had slotted into place. Surely that meant the rest would be easier, right?

I'm going to figure this out, I told him. *I'm not giving up until you're free.*

Gloam was still for a long moment, his caged head bent low. Slowly, he started writing.

I am so scared that I will have to hurt you.

I stared at the words, my body filling with cold fear. Have to hurt me? What did he mean? Why would he have to—

It hit me, and I relaxed infinitesimally. Once again, he was trying to tell me something in a roundabout way—avoiding any mention of whatever hold Mary had that made him protect her—but also confirming that he *did* always have to obey her direct orders. Because he was telling me that he was scared she would order him to hurt me.

Honestly, I was scared of that too. Especially now that I knew he would *have* to obey.

I won't give her any reason to make you hurt me, I wrote, but that didn't lessen the fear. Maybe she'd get Gloam to hurt me for no reason at all, just because she could. Just because it would amuse her. We had no idea. And if Gloam was scared of that happening, that meant it was well within her character.

Would removing the cage break her hold over you? I asked, even though I knew he wouldn't be able to give me a direct answer.

But the cage had been put on him for a reason. His voice had been taken from him for a reason.

The chain was just for show, but the cage wasn't. I knew that. He'd tried to tell me that without actually *telling* me during our very first conversation.

I knew the answer that was coming, but my shoulders still slumped when I read his next words.

I cannot answer.

I had to assume that was a *yes*. But even if it wasn't, I was still going to get that fucking cage off him. And those rings out of his back.

This journey had been slowly sapping the energy out of me, although my nightly talks with Gloam—when it was just the two of us, huddled together in the dark—had made all the endless walking and impotent anger at watching him do Mary's bidding worth it. But I had made a breakthrough today, and I could feel my determination returning in full force.

I can't wait to see your face when we get that cage off you, I wrote, letting him know that I wasn't giving up despite his inability to confirm my suspicions.

Gloam let out a low rumble of amusement, and his hand was more relaxed as he wrote, now that we weren't getting too close to the truth he was compelled to hide.

Mary has already told you what I look like under here. I am ugly to human eyes. Not like you.

A spark of heat caught and warmed in my belly. Did that mean he liked how I looked?

Mary can go fuck herself, I scrawled on the page, digging the pencil in hard. *I know you're not ugly. You couldn't be to me.*

I could sense Gloam staring at the words as he remained still. Then, slowly, his free hand crept closer to me, and my breath caught in my throat. I was pressed up tight against his side, my legs stretched in front of me beside his, and the hand holding my pencil was resting on my thigh. I relaxed my fingers immediately in anticipation, letting it roll off my leg and to the ground.

Gloam slowly curled his fingers around mine, giving me enough time to pull away if I wanted to, which—of course I didn't. I flipped my palm quickly to lace our fingers together, staring down at our joined hands. His was so big, almost engulfing mine. His skin was a dark grey in the lantern's weak light, but I could detect the veins snaking over the back of his hand.

Not the same as his thick cabling—these were more delicate. Fragile looking.

Unable to stop myself, I let my head drop onto Gloam's thick shoulder. I'd fallen asleep like this several times now, but he never seemed to mind, even though it meant he had to stay perfectly still until I woke up and sheepishly moved away to my sleeping bag. I could feel myself getting tired, warm and secure by his side, but it wasn't fair to doze off against him yet again.

I squeezed his hand hard, the heat from his palm making me glad I'd taken my gloves off earlier. I didn't want to let go.

"I should try and sleep, I guess."

My reluctant tone made it clear I'd rather stay up talking to him, but I still wasn't getting enough sleep out here, and that was dangerous. It meant I was sluggish and slow to react—even slower than normal—which could easily get me killed in the Wastes.

His head dipped in a slight nod.

Of course, he wrote. *You need to rest. You have had an unsettling day.*

Honestly, every day out here was at least somewhat unsettling, but I didn't say that. I reluctantly scooted back from Gloam's warm side and rolled out my sleeping bag, already shivering. I fished my gloves out of my duffle and pulled them on in an attempt to warm my already-frozen fingers.

"Fuck, it's cold," I whispered as I slipped into the freezing nylon, my teeth chattering.

The ground was too hard beneath me, making it impossible to find a comfortable spot. I obviously didn't have a pillow, and my duffle was too lumpy to make even a half-decent one, so I tended to sleep with one arm bent behind my head to cushion it from the hard ground.

It was too cold for me to have an arm exposed tonight. Instead of curling up on my side like I normally did, I stayed on my back, a headache already forming against the back of my skull where it pressed into the ground. I stared up at the pitch-black sky as a full-body shiver wracked me, making my teeth clack.

Gloam's leather pants creaked gently as he knelt beside me, resting one big hand on my shoulder. Fuck, even through the freezing sleeping bag and all my clothes I could feel its warmth, and I desperately wanted to burrow into it.

He'd brought the notebook and the lantern over with him, and he gestured at the open page, obviously wanting me to read something.

I sat up, shivering, and squinted.

I can keep you warm.

I stilled, shock momentarily stopping the incessant shivering. Swallowing hard, I turned my eyes from the notebook up to his cage.

"I—You don't have to—"

Gloam jerked his head and pointed at his words on the page again. Biting my lip, I eyed him longingly. His big warm body—so warm even though he didn't wear a shirt. And I already knew, without a doubt, that I would sleep so much better in his arms, safe and secure.

Part of me felt like I should protest more—insist he didn't have to do this for me—but… fuck it. I was fucking freezing, and I just *wanted* to. I wanted him to hold me. I wanted to breathe him in while I dropped off.

"Okay, if you don't mind."

My voice was embarrassingly eager as I scrambled out of my sleeping bag. As Gloam returned to his spot against the back of the RV, waiting, I unzipped it so it was like a big blanket that I could spread over both of us.

My cheeks were hot when I made my way over. After hesitating, I awkwardly situated myself on his lap, curled up. But the moment Gloam's huge arms went around me, pulling me tighter against him, I relaxed with a sigh.

The sleeping bag was warmer now as I draped it over both of us, but it was Gloam's wonderful body heat that stopped my intense shivering. It felt intimate, having both of us beneath the makeshift blanket, and I was mortified when my dick gave an eager twitch, even though he wouldn't have been able to feel it.

He was just being kind. Trying to look after me. I couldn't be a fucking creep about it.

"Thank you," I whispered, wriggling closer, desperate to suck up all his warmth.

Gloam's answering rumble vibrated under me, and I sighed as I settled my cold temple on his shoulder. Even though his muscles were hard and solid, it was the best pillow I could have asked for out here.

I fell asleep shockingly fast, lulled by the slow rise and fall of Gloam's broad chest underneath me.

That was how I started sleeping in the arms of a monster every night.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

My abuela had always said she thought I had some kind of intuition. That I was *aware* of things.

She'd said it ever since the time, when I was a little kid, I had woken up and told her I'd dreamt our elderly neighbour left me a big box of candy at the door, and we'd found out later that day that she had died in the night.

The sad news made my abuela pat my cheeks and tell me I had a gift, while my mom irritably scolded her for scaring me and making me think I saw dead people in my dreams.

I didn't think I had a gift. I was pretty sure that sweet old lady had often given me candy when she saw me in the hall, and I'd probably hoped that by telling my abuela about my dream, it would somehow become real life. That I would *manifest* a nice little box of candy outside our shitty apartment door, waiting for me on the stained, threadbare carpet.

But hadn't I—on my first day out here with Gloam and Mary—briefly imagined a giant, burrowing worm monster rising up out of the ground and swallowing me whole?

I was pretty sure I had manifested that, somehow.

We'd been endlessly walking, no different to any other day, when Gloam suddenly stopped and straightened, his big body growing incredibly tense. He quickly clicked at the two borolesh to stop, which I'd never seen him do without a direct order from Mary before.

"What's wrong?" I whispered, glancing over at the RV.

Feeling it come to a slow halt, Mary's irritable face appeared at the window, scowling at us.

"What are you doing?" she snapped after shoving open a window and poking her head out. "Get them moving again!"

Gloam was vibrating with tension beside me, and I could somehow hear the reluctance when he clicked at the two borolesh. They slowly started lumbering forward.

Then he clicked again to get them to stop.

"*What are you doing?"* Mary screeched. "Get them moving—*now!*"

I stared as Gloam's shoulders bunched up with tension, his hands clenching into tight fists. The left gripped his war hammer tight. He clicked,

and borolesh started moving once more.

And then he immediately clicked at them to stop.

If I hadn't already figured out that he was physically compelled to obey her direct orders when he really didn't want to, this would have done it.

Mary spluttered with fury, but before she could say anything else, I was suddenly airborne. Gloam had picked me up with ease and was thrusting me at the tiny ladder on the side of the RV. My heart hammering, I gripped onto the metal with my gloves and twisted my head around to stare down at him.

"What—"

But he was giving me gentle, urgent shoves to get me to move. My body automatically obeyed, scrambling up onto the roof. The heat of the humming generator next to me warmed my leg through my pants, and I stared down at Gloam.

"I don't know what game you're playing," I could hear Mary snarling from beneath me, "but if you don't get this—"

Whatever else she'd been about to say was lost when the earth in front of us exploded. Mary shrieked, and one of the borolesh let out a low, distressed warble as they stumbled on their huge front arms.

Gloam was a tense wall of muscle on the ground below, and I watched, terrified for him, as he swung his huge war hammer up into both hands, gripping its ornate handle tight.

The dust cloud began to settle, enough for me to start making out a thick shape as I peered over, my breaths coming too fast behind my mask. I choked when the huge, tube-like shape became visible, writhing wildly in the air like a decapitated snake.

It was a giant worm. A giant fucking burrowing worm. I'd manifested it with my ridiculous thoughts on my first day out here, and now it was going to eat us—Gloam. The borolesh. I didn't give a fuck about Mary, but Gloam and the borolesh were down there, exposed. Mary sure as shit wasn't going to leave her RV to help, even though she was the one with a gun, and I was up on the roof—thanks to Gloam—without a single weapon.

The creature was enormous. It just kept rising into the air, pushing more of its monstrous body out of the earth. It flopped down with a crash that shook the RV beneath my boots as its tail end finally emerged from the hole it had made.

It *looked* like a worm, if worms were the length of a stretch limousine, as tall as a horse, and a toxic orange-red colour that screamed danger. But

then I belatedly noticed the hundreds and hundreds of tiny sharp legs that were letting it move impossibly fast toward us. It wasn't a worm. It was a giant fucking millipede.

Horror made me freeze up as it shot across the ground, directly toward the RV. The two borolesh lowed in distress and lurched to the side, trying to escape it in a panic. Their movement caused the whole RV to tilt dangerously, and I dropped to my knees and gripped the edge railing tight as Mary screamed from inside.

Seconds before it reached Gloam, the creature's thin slash of a mouth dropped open, horrifyingly wide, showing an endless cavern behind two rows of stubby, sharp teeth. Gloam swung his huge war hammer around, not managing to hit it, but successfully deterring an attack as it jerked to the side to avoid the impact, letting out a ululating screech.

Its legs skittered, the dry rustle of them on the ground repulsive. I wanted to call out to Gloam when it swung back around, its head rising into the air and waving back and forth in a way that made me feel sick. Its mouth gaped, hanging open so wide it looked like its lower jaw was dislocated.

The borolesh stumbled to the side again when it landed back on the ground with a booming thud. My heart leapt into my throat as the RV jerked, rocking precariously. Through the open window below me, I could hear Mary wailing and her pet shulc chittering with excitement.

The giant creature suddenly swung around in a big circle, and I choked on a breath when I saw a huge, fat barb emerge from the blunt end of its tail. Gloam jerked back to avoid it, the needle-sharp tip coming terrifyingly close to his bare chest. He had only limited movement thanks to that fucking chain.

The creature screeched again and jabbed with its barb. Gloam jerked to the side to avoid it, the weight of his war hammer almost making him stumble before he righted his footing. I was panting with fear, terrified I was going to see his big body get impaled on that gleaming barb and lifted into the air. Or that he would jerk too far in reflex and those thick metal rings would get ripped out of his back, snapping his spine.

The next time it jabbed, Gloam was ready. He swung his war hammer around again, and I watched in horror as it connected with the fattest point of the barb and split it cleanly from the monster's body. Toxic orange goo

gushed from the wound, and the creature's shriek almost burst my eardrums.

Its tail end out of commission, it twisted to face Gloam once more. Its maw stretched, gaping even wider, intent on swallowing my beastie whole. But as it got closer, Gloam lifted his war hammer over his head, arms trembling with the effort, and brought it down directly on the inside of the creature's lower jaw when it was mere feet away, pinning it to the ground.

He heaved himself to the side as much as his chain allowed, his arms bulging as he dragged the war hammer—and the entire, giant creature—with him. Trying to rip off its lower jaw, I assumed. My gorge rose at the wet orange trail it left behind it from its lower jaw, its outer layer scraping off onto the hard ground. Its mouth snapped shut around Gloam's hammer, tail thrashing dangerously close to the borolesh, sending fresh fear streaking through me. Its barb was gone, but it could still easily hurt them.

There weren't any weapons out here. I couldn't help him. I swung my head around frantically, as if one was going to magically appear beside me on the roof. When I looked back at Gloam, he had one big boot planted against the side of the creature's closed mouth, and his arms were straining as he tried to pull his war hammer free. The monster kept thrashing, trying to dislodge him, but he managed to stay steady until, in a rush, the war hammer exploded out the front of the creature's mouth in a torrent of shattered teeth and gooey orange blood.

Oh fuck. I retched, and my nausea only got worse when Gloam lifted his war hammer over his head once again. The creature's thrashing had slowed. It looked dazed from the injury it had sustained, its big body shivering and those legs scrabbling weakly over the ground.

Then Gloam brought down his war hammer between its big white eyes with all the strength in his body.

It died instantly. I could tell in the way it immediately went limp, its countless legs curling up, those white eyes somehow already filming over with a dull grey. In the ensuing silence, its long, fat body began to deflate.

"F-f-f-fuck."

I was shaking too hard to move, my fingers not yet able to uncurl from their white-knuckled grip around the railing.

My heart racing, I looked at Gloam still standing in front of the dead creature's body. His back heaved with his breaths. When he turned and his

caged head tilted up to look at me, checking I was alright, my eyes filled abruptly with tears.

Before I could even register my body moving, I was scrambling down the ladder and running toward him.

“Gloam—” My voice hitched, and I wanted nothing more than to throw my arms around him, to make sure he was alright. To thank him for protecting me.

Mary’s high-pitched voice stopped me dead in my tracks, my shoulders hunching up to my ears.

“Get us away from that.” Her voice wavered, even though she was trying to mask her fear. “Get them moving.”

That was it. Nothing else. No thanks for protecting her—all of us. No mention that he had been right all along to make us stop, even when she kept ordering him to keep moving.

By the time I looked over my shoulder to scowl at her, she had already shut the window and was no longer visible.

Gloam had moved closer when I turned back, and I desperately wanted to cling onto his hand.

“Are you alright? Did it hurt you?” My voice wobbled, and I was glad for my mask when my chin trembled.

He shook his head, then nodded at the borolesh. I fell into step beside him, still shaking as we skirted around the deflated corpse and its snapped off barb and walked to the front to check on them.

They were both fine, thank god, but unsettled. They calmed when Gloam made a low clicking sound in his throat and stroked the nearest one’s flank.

But soon after that, he had to give them the signal to get moving again, because Mary had ordered it. They moved a little faster than normal, no doubt eager to get away from the monstrous dead body.

“Thank you for protecting me,” I whispered as we walked, aching to burrow into his arms.

I settled for reaching over and squeezing his hand, all too aware that Mary could be watching. I didn’t know what she’d do if she realised Gloam and I were close. That he had some comfort out here when she had clearly made every effort to ensure he didn’t.

He squeezed back, his long fingers closing around mine before letting go. It felt inadequate. Not enough to show him how grateful I was. How

much he meant to me. How much I thought of him.

With each step we took, my heart jumped with the fear that another one of those things was going to explode from the ground in front of us. Right underneath us. Would we have time to get the borolesh free if the ground opened up beneath Mary's RV and she was sucked right into the waiting mouth of one of those things? Would I have the strength to pull Gloam's body up if the same thing happened under his feet? I didn't think I would. He had to weigh a ton.

"Are there likely to be more of them?" I whispered, inching closer until his arm brushed against the sleeve of my jacket.

Gloam nodded once, not looking down at me. I could tell he was watching the area in front of us carefully, which meant he was worried about another one of those things bursting out of the ground as well.

I fell silent, letting him concentrate as we made our way across dry, patchy grass and hard-packed earth. Gloam kept his war hammer resting over his shoulder, and I wondered if he was worried that the vibration of it dragging over the ground would attract more of those creatures. Surely if anything was going to, it would be the heavy weight of the RV that the borolesh were being forced to pull, and there was nothing we could do about that.

Still, I didn't comment as we walked. I was jittery, jumping at every little noise, convinced we were going to be attacked again. I kept peering back over my shoulder to make sure nothing was rushing up behind us, skittering across the ground on too many legs with a gaping mouth opened wide, ready to scoop us up without even slowing.

We eventually reached an old highway, and even though it was far more difficult and slow-paced to navigate the borolesh and unwieldy vehicle between all the abandoned cars and trucks, Gloam kept us on it. I was beyond grateful to feel the hard resistance of asphalt under my boots, even though a part of me suspected that those things could probably break through it. At least we'd have more warning if they did.

I only started to unclench after several hours of walking. We had passed through a couple of tiny, empty towns and an industrial park uneventfully. When I felt Gloam relax beside me, just a little, I let out a slow breath.

The borolesh seemed more relaxed now too, but I supposed they could have had relatively short memories. I had no idea about their kind. I'd have

to ask Gloam more about them when we sat down to talk later that night, after we'd stopped.

I tensed back up when Mary suddenly swung open the vehicle door, descending one step as she gripped the edge with fingers freshly painted pink at the tips. She seemed to have completely recovered from our terrifying encounter with the giant worm monster, but then she had been safely tucked away inside her RV. The only way she would have been in danger was if Gloam had died while being forced to protect her.

"Direct them north," she barked at Gloam, whose big shoulders stiffened at the order.

After a reluctant pause, he clicked one of his signals to the two lumbering borolesh. His chain brushed the backs of my knees as the big beasts slowly started turning right, pulling the RV away from us and off the highway.

I adjusted my course beside the silent Gloam, hands clenching repeatedly into fists as my anxiety grew.

"What's north?" I asked nervously, not expecting an answer.

Surprisingly, Mary's watery eyes met mine, and she smiled—a gleeful smile that made me feel sick.

"You'll see."

My stomach bottomed out with unease, but I said nothing. Beside me, Gloam was once again a wall of tense muscle, his hand clenching around the decorated handle of the war hammer still resting over his shoulder.

I could tell that he knew where we were heading. And I could tell that he didn't like it.

What was north?

By the time Mary made us stop so she could retire for the night, I was jittery. I was going to turn into Ghost at this rate, anxious over everything, worrying about every possible outcome, but Mary's sick little smile had made a ball of icy fear form in my stomach, and it hadn't dissipated in the hours we'd walked since.

As soon as it was safe, I pulled out the notebook and hurried to sit beside Gloam, who was already on the ground with his back against the far end of the RV in our usual spot. As soon as I was pressed against his side, he took

the notebook and a pencil out of my hands and flicked it open to our half-filled page, scribbling urgently. I hurried to set the solar lantern beside us so I could see.

You must go now, he wrote. *Please. It's not safe where we're going.*

I swallowed, feeling sick.

Where are we going? I asked. *What's north?*

The Herald. His big body was tense beside me. *That's what they call themself. They are a creature from my world that has amassed a following here.*

The Herald? A following?

The sick feeling grew worse.

What following? For what?

My handwriting was even messier than normal in my desperate haste to find out more.

A new age, Gloam wrote back, caged head bent low over the notebook. *They want to take over.*

I stared at his words, at his elegant, jagged handwriting, my breaths whistling out of my nose increasingly quickly.

Take over as in rule over humans? I asked, flushing at how stupid I felt in that moment. Like I needed it spelled out to me.

Yes.

Fuck. It was the line the military used to keep people too scared to leave the coastal cities—that the monsters came here to rule over us or wipe us out. But after eight years in the Wastes, I'd seen how untrue that was. How monsters, for the most part, were like any other living beings, driven by natural instincts or just wanting to be left alone. There were some that wanted to eat humans, sure, but I'd always seen that as no different to humans eating cows or pigs or chickens. We were just lower in the food chain to some of them. The only difference was, we weren't used to it.

But it turned out maybe the military had been right all along.

How? I asked, holding Gloam's arm tight when he took the notebook back and started writing.

He didn't acknowledge my grip around his thick bicep—so thick my fingers stood no chance of circling its entire girth—and I tried to ignore the rush of comfort, and something else, that his solid presence gave me.

Fear, mostly. And preying on humans who desperately seek a higher meaning. A greater purpose. The ones in the Herald's congregation regard

them as a god.

My hand was trembling as I started writing back, having to let go of Gloam's arm to answer him.

Like a cult?

Yes. Precisely.

But how are they planning on taking over all of humanity??? And why is Mary taking us there??

Gloam's big fingers spasmed around the pencil, and my heart dropped as I realised this would be something he couldn't answer. But then he shifted his big body to face me and took my hands in both of his. I stared down at them, absently squeezing as if it would help ease the tension in his frame.

Gloam made a low rumble of frustration when he realised he had to let go to tell me anything. Snatching up the notebook, which he'd discarded in his lap, he started writing fast, his haste making his handwriting a slanted scrawl.

How any cult does. By cultivating the fear that if you are not with them, you are doomed. But the Herald is worse than that, Adam. Much worse. They bring in non-believing humans, who they call the coals, and make them choose whether to join the flock or not. If they refuse, they are consumed.

My vision went spotty as I read his words, then read them again. Gloam remained silent and tense in front of me. My hand was shaking as I scratched out my reply on the page.

What do you mean by consumed?

He wrote his reply immediately.

I mean eaten.

My vision wavered completely, but I blinked hard as Gloam kept writing.

If a human chooses not to join, they are roasted over a fire and consumed by the Herald and the flock. As a message that acquiescence is what keeps the Herald's followers alive, and to nurture the belief that they are all stronger. Better. That they have transcended other humans by being part of the Herald's congregation.

I was panting hard, only vaguely aware of curling my fingers too tight around Gloam's when he gently took my free hand back in his. He continued writing with the other.

Mary is a believer, Adam. She is part of the flock. And she is planning to take you to the Herald as the newest coal.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

It made sense now. Why Mary had been willing—eager, even—to let me tag along. She'd never been planning on letting me 'work' in her menagerie. She'd been planning on taking me to the Herald this whole time.

To the monster cannibal cult trying to enslave all of humanity.

I'm sorry, Gloam wrote, his shoulders hunched miserably. *I should have realised. I should have seen this coming.*

"It's not your fault," I whispered out loud, dazed. He obviously hadn't known this was her plan.

Please, go now. Gloam's free hand gripped mine tight, trying to convey the urgency in his scribbled words. *If I could*

His words stopped abruptly, the last letter ending up with a long, jagged slash down the page as his hand spasmed hard and he couldn't continue.

The terror grew inside me, but the sight of that jagged, helpless line almost made me want to cry. I couldn't just leave Gloam to this fucking terrible fate. I couldn't. But then, what did that mean? That I was going to get eaten by this Herald and their cult if I stayed with him? Then I wouldn't be any good to Gloam either.

"Fuck," I whimpered out loud, pursing my lips tight when I realised what I'd done. I couldn't keep speaking out loud. It could wake Mary.

My hand was shaking when I wrote back, *I don't want to leave you.*

You have to, he replied immediately, squeezing my hand again.

But what will happen to you?

Do not worry about me.

I stared down at his words, jaw clenched hard and eyes burning with the intensity of my emotions. This was all so fucking unfair. Right now, I was his one shot at freedom. If I'd had enough time, I would have found a way to do it. I *knew* I would have. But now I had to leave him because Mary was—somehow—even fucking worse than we'd initially realised.

Not only did she collect beasties and keep them locked away, she was also part of a fucking cannibal cult that burned humans alive.

And I had to leave Gloam in the hands of that monster.

Gloam shifted until his back was against the RV again, shoulders slumping with defeat. I scrambled around until I was kneeling between his

cocked legs, his thick thighs spread on either side of me.

“I’m going to free you,” I told him, my voice low but steely with determination. “I promise, Gloam.”

He was so still, but after a moment he raised one hand and trailed his long fingers down my arm in a soft caress.

My breath shuddered out of me at the touch. He was so gentle with me, but he had been ruthless when he had to kill that giant monster. When he’d protected me. I knew he was compelled to protect Mary—that the compulsion had been his driving force—but he’d still made sure I was safe. Before anything else, he had gotten me up that ladder and onto the RV roof.

I launched myself into his arms.

Gloam stiffened at the unexpected embrace. We were in a somewhat compromising position to be fair, with me pressed up against him between his spread thighs. But I wasn’t trying to be suggestive. I just wanted to comfort him, and I wanted to take comfort from him myself.

My face was buried against the bend of his thick neck, the sharp, unyielding edge of his cage pressing against my temple. I wrapped my arms around his back, being careful of the metal rings piercing his spine, and held him tighter.

He slowly wrapped his arms around me and pulled me even closer, his chest shuddering against mine with his exhale.

I didn’t want to move. He was so warm and solid. Letting go of him only briefly, I reached up and fumbled to pull my mask off so I could breathe in his scent. Maybe it made me a creep, but right then I didn’t care. I needed to breathe him in, for some reason. I needed to feel the warmth of him beneath my cheek.

His skin smelled clean and warm, faintly of metal, and I buried my nose deeper in the bend of his neck and took in as much of it as I could.

When I felt an unmistakable twitch—from him—against the fly of my pants, I sucked in a sharp breath.

Gloam pushed me away from him immediately, shoulders hunched as he fumbled for the notebook.

I’m sorry.

His handwriting was a messy scrawl.

“No,” I breathed immediately, eyes dropping unbidden to his lap.

His thick thigh blocked out the faint light from the solar lantern, leaving everything in shadows. My gut clenched with want regardless.

“I… Fuck, I want you.” The words tripped out of me, and I was helpless to stop them. “But I… I…”

I want you too.

Gloam’s hand was trembling slightly as he wrote.

My cock jerked in my pants as I read it, filling up so rapidly that I went lightheaded. I released a shuddering breath.

“I want to touch you so much, Gloam.” He let out a low rumble at my whispered words. “But it… It feels wrong when you’re like this. You’re enslaved.”

Not by you, he wrote immediately.

I didn’t want to risk Mary waking up, so I grabbed the other pencil and shakily wrote back, *It still feels wrong.*

It isn’t wrong. I want you, Adam. I want you to touch me. Please.

I clenched my jaw, aching to close the gap between us and touch every part of him that I could. It wasn’t even about the possibility of an orgasm at the hands of someone else for the first time in years. It was about *him.* I wanted him. I wanted to be closer to him.

The flare of attraction I had felt for him from the very beginning—even when it had made me ashamed—had only gotten stronger over our time together. But I’d been able, for the most part, to push it back because of the position he was in. Because of the gnawing hint of a power imbalance between us, even if I wasn’t the one who had enslaved him. I was free, and he wasn’t.

Lips pulling down with regret, I shook my head as I wrote back.

I don’t think I can. It feels like I’d be taking advantage of you.

Adam, Gloam scribbled immediately. *I am telling you how I feel about you in the only way I can. Please don’t take that away from me by dismissing my words.*

My breath shuddered out of me. I could feel myself being swayed, because he was right. He had only one way to explicitly tell me what he wanted. As self-serving as the thought may have been, it was wrong of me to ignore his actual words and put others in his mouth when he didn’t have the luxury of refuting them out loud.

“Are you sure?” I whispered, my voice shaky.

Gloam nodded immediately and wrote again to drive his point home.

Yes. I am sure. I want you, Adam. Whatever you are willing to give me.

I almost launched myself back into his arms at that but had just enough common sense to speak first.

"We need a signal, in case I'm… I do something you don't like. It's not like you can tell me to stop."

I thought about it for a moment, then reached for the notebook.

If I do something you don't like, tug on my earlobe, okay? And I'll stop immediately. I promise.

Gloam read the words and nodded once, the side of his cage glinting in the lantern's weak light.

No longer able to wait, I let my hands shoot out and connect with his chest, trailing my fingertips down thick, rounded pecs and over the hard peaks and valleys of his stomach. The muscles twitched under my hands, and Gloam let his knees fall open wide. When his hips arched subtly, my mouth watered.

His pants were dark, making it still hard to see even though the light could reach him better now, but when I slid a hand down, it brushed over the stiff root of him beneath the leather.

Gloam let out a low sound from his chest, and I licked my suddenly dry lips as I followed that bulge down to the right, mapping the outline of his thick cock straining against the leg of his pants. It was hard as granite, and even through the leather I could feel more of those thick cables winding under his skin, all along the bulging shaft. My thighs tightened as my cock strained in my pants, giving a hearty throb in reaction.

My usually deft fingers were clumsy as I fumbled with the lacing of his pants, too hasty to get them loosened so that thick cock could spring free and I could feel the warmth of it, bare against my palm.

When I reached in to ease the unbending length out, it jerked free to smack against his tight stomach, and I couldn't help but groan.

Fuck, he was thick. *So* thick. Not monstrously long, but his cock widened into a mid-shaft bulge before slimming back down toward the head, which was already gleaming in the low light. It looked to be the same colour as the rest of his skin at the root, becoming slightly lighter along the shaft toward the flushed tip.

It was a thing of beauty.

"Fuck," I whispered shakily as I wrapped my fingers around the base of him, shivering at the feel of those thick cables under my palm.

He didn’t seem to have any hair there, and I wondered if he would find mine unattractive. I slid my fist up to the widest point and squeezed, my balls clenching when I realised I couldn’t get my hand to close all the way around. Gloam shuddered hard and palmed my sides, fingers gripping me tight.

Continuing my slow exploration, I slid my hand up higher until I could swipe my thumb over his weeping tip. His foreskin was pulled back, exposing the vulnerable head, and I blindly pressed the pad of my thumb into the tiny, slick slit, my own dick starting to leak as Gloam jerked and sucked in a breath within his cage.

I lowered my other hand and, after tugging his pants down a little more, cupped his smooth, heavy balls, immensely gratified by Gloam’s answering choked groan. When I started moving my fist up and down his straining cock in a slow, tight pull, he groaned again, the sound coming from deep within his chest.

Part of me couldn’t believe I was doing this. Jerking off a monster. But he wasn’t *just* a monster. He was Gloam. He’d been my silent companion out here in the Wastes. He had shared things with me. He’d fed me and kept me warm and safe at night. He was trying to protect me, even though he was under Mary’s control.

Gratitude swelled, alongside a sharp ache of sadness. I wanted to give him something good. A brief moment of pleasure in this otherwise hopeless, grey existence.

Wishing I could see his face and kiss his mouth, I tipped forward until my lips connected with his solid chest. Gloam’s breath hitched, making the muscles jump under my mouth, and I could feel the faint tremble running through him as I stroked his cock faster and gave his big balls a gentle squeeze. Trailing my lips over one pec, I found the tiny, tight nub of his nipple and circled it with my tongue. When I sucked it, Gloam shuddered, his fingers squeezing my sides through my shirt.

His cock was weeping copiously now, slicking my pumping fist and filling the intimate air between us with a deliciously obscene sound. With the very tip of my middle finger, pressed lightly against the vulnerable, sensitive stretch of skin just behind his balls, I could have sworn I felt additional wetness, but I didn’t know what it was.

My question was answered when Gloam reached down between his thick thighs, the sight of which made me pant with arousal, and covered the

hand on his balls with his own. Gently, he moved my hand downward, giving me time to pull away, until my middle finger slid between his cheeks and encountered the tight pucker of his hole.

My breath left me in a rush as my cock throbbed. He *was* slick here. I supposed it made sense, if it was the males who were impregnated in his species—if this channel was designed for reproduction.

I glanced up at him questioningly, and his caged head dipped in a nod, his chest heaving.

Holy shit. I stroked his twitching hole, gritting my teeth at the soft, slick friction against the pad of my finger. I circled it with tiny strokes for long moments until Gloam was shuddering, hips bucking, forcing his thick cock through the tight ring of my fingers.

Trusting him to use his signal if he wanted me to stop, I slowly crooked my finger until it breached him, the tip slipping inside. Gloam shook, boots scrabbling over the hard ground behind my folded legs as his hips strained even more.

I couldn't help the moan that escaped me when I slid my finger deeper, into the hot, tight depths of his ass. He… It almost felt *ribbed* in there, like those thick cables that snaked under his skin were also *inside* him. When I tried to imagine how it would feel around my dick, my knees went weak and I almost came in my pants.

Gloam's hand was shaking as he raised it, the two fingers he held up an unmistakable request. His head tipped back when I obeyed, the cage giving a low *thunk* against the metal of the RV's exterior, thankfully not loud enough to wake Mary up inside. I could still hear her obnoxious snores from within the vehicle, but I was able to block them out easily.

His harsh, panting breaths sounded so loud inside that cage. I wished fervently, yet again, that I could see his face. That I could see the pleasure I was giving him contort his features. I couldn't picture what he might look like in there at all, but it didn't matter. I didn't care what he looked like. Despite my immediate attraction to him, looks had nothing to do with *this*.

This was because I wanted *him*, Gloam. Desperately, with every part of me. With an intensity that was frightening, because I'd never felt that way about anyone.

My gut clenched when he held up his hand again, four trembling fingers raised this time. My eyes widened. *Four?* He wanted *four* straight away?

I didn’t want to risk hurting him, so instead I carefully slipped in a third, my cock straining at the lurid wet sound my fingers made when they entered him. He was getting even slicker, and he slumped lower against the side of the RV to give me more room between his legs, making himself totally vulnerable to me.

The mid-point swell of his shaft was bulging beneath my sliding fingers, harder than stone. As I carefully pushed my four fingers inside him, stretching him wide, I felt that swell give a heavy throb.

Gloam shook like he’d been electrocuted, hips straining as the first thick rope of cum shot straight up into the air between us. My mouth watered when it splattered over his jumping stomach muscles, followed by another, then another. I had to clench my ass and thighs hard to stop myself from coming at the sight, the base of my shaft tingling and my nuts like rocks, drawn up tight and agonisingly sensitive against the fabric of my underwear.

I squeezed that bulge to prolong his orgasm. It continued to throb heavily in my hand, a few smaller, less forceful streams of fluid pulsing from the tip of his cock, until his body finally went loose, and his thighs unclenched on either side of me.

He was shaking, his breaths heavy within his cage. Slowly, I slid my fingers from his still weakly spasming body. I didn’t want to let go of his cock, but I gentled my grip as I slid it up and down the pulsing length, still half-hard but not as achingly stiff as it had been.

Gloam reached for me when he recovered but I shook my head, even as I trembled. It felt like my dick was going to explode in my pants.

“I can’t make you touch me,” I whispered shakily, finally releasing him and shuffling back, when my whole body was straining to do the opposite—to get even closer to him. “It doesn’t feel right.”

Gloam let out a frustrated, impatient noise, but didn’t reach for me again. He would never force me into anything if I said no, I knew that without a doubt. But I could see the tension creeping back into his body. I could feel how much he wanted to touch me. It made my resolve weaken, just a little.

“But fuck, I need to come so bad,” I choked out in a whisper, fingers already fumbling to undo my pants.

When my cock sprang free and bobbed between us, Gloam made a soft, hungry noise in his throat.

It was agonisingly stiff, the head already purpling and wet all over. When I wrapped my fingers around it, my body jerked with sensitivity. Fuck, this wouldn't take long. I hadn't been able to jerk off once since leaving the camp, which was the longest I'd gone in years.

I could feel Gloam's eyes on it within his cage. His chest started rising quicker again, and his fat dick twitched against his thigh, still half hard and filling again rapidly. His ropy stomach gleamed with his release, which was also being spread all over my cock from my hand as I stroked, making me shudder even harder at the thought.

I could barely focus when Gloam grabbed the notebook, lying discarded on the ground beside us, and wrote with trembling fingers. I had to still my hand to concentrate on the words, panting hard.

Please, Adam. I want to touch you so much.

Fuck. My resolve crumbled embarrassingly fast, all my good intentions flying out the window. Who was I to deny him what he wanted? The thought was entirely self-serving, but I was too weak, too desperate, to keep fighting it.

Fingers still ringing the base of my cock, gripping tight, I nodded frantically. "Yeah. Yeah, okay. Fuck."

Gloam tangled his fingers with mine on my free hand and slowly drew me closer into the cradle of his thighs, giving me more than enough time to pull free if I wanted to. I obviously didn't. At his gentle urging, I moved my knees to the outside of his legs until I was straddling his hips.

Breathing hard, I looked down and made a strangled sound at the sight of my cock hovering just above his. Unable to stop myself, I lowered my body until my weeping tip trailed down the underside of his shaft, over that thick bulge.

Gloam rumbled out a low moan and arched his hips beneath me, the slide of his cock against mine making me tremble. One big hand palmed my tense thigh, while the other slowly moved into the space between our bodies. When long, strong fingers pinned our shafts together and wrapped around the twin lengths, I went weak.

Biting my lip to hold back my needy whimper, I let go of my dick and raised my arm to rest my hand against the side of the RV, just above his shoulder. My knuckles bleached as my fingers dug in, trying to grip onto the smooth metal. I couldn't take my eyes off the sight of him stroking our

cocks together, the friction of all those thick cables making me want to sob with lust.

His cock wasn't much longer than mine, but it was thicker. So much thicker. When I tilted my hips just a little the sensitive undersides of our weeping heads slid together, and we both shook wildly from the feel. My sac jumped, hugging the base of my shaft and brushing against his.

I was sure that my heavy, rasping pants would wake Mary up. Or at the very least, draw some lurking creature to us. But outside of our frantic breaths, it was still and quiet around us. When the slick sound of our cocks sliding together, being stroked by Gloam's huge fist, reached my ears, I knew I had only seconds left.

My hips jerked, then jerked again, tunnelling my cock through his tight fist faster and faster, over that thick swell and all those textured cables. Gloam shuddered beneath me, squeezing my thigh, and angled our cocks more toward his body. The implication of that kicked off my orgasm, my free hand gripping his thick shoulder too tight, fingers curling under the strap of his leather harness. I wanted to come all over him.

I wasn't sure how I managed to hold back my agonised shout when my cock bucked in his tight grip and started firing ropes of cum onto his chest and stomach. I bit down so hard on my lower lip I tasted metal, shaking like a leaf, hips jerking helplessly again and again as blinding pleasure exploded across my whole body and tingling heat spread through my balls and up the twitching length of my cock. I gasped when Gloam tensed beneath me, his body shaking, and he started to come again with a shuddering exhale.

Fuck. The feel of that impossibly thick, rock-hard bulge throbbing under my sensitive cock made another weak spurt leave me, draining my balls and decorating his slick, pulsing head as his own second orgasm gradually slowed.

We were both weak and trembling and breathing too fast when it ended. I slumped on top of Gloam, unable to move, burying my face in his thick shoulder. My breaths felt wet and hot against his skin. His front was a slick mess, the feel of it against my sensitive, softening cock making me shiver.

His hand was still trapped between us, and I could feel his fingertips gently sifting through the wiry hair above the root of my cock. I flushed. I normally kept on top of my grooming, but I obviously hadn't been able to out here. I wondered if he didn't like it. At least I'd never been able to grow a beard, so I didn't have to worry about shaving.

When my brain finally came back online, I couldn't stop myself from pressing a kiss to the top of his hard pec. The muscle jumped under my lips, and I heard Gloam suck in a sharp breath within his cage.

Finally moving off him, I retrieved my bag with shaky limbs and pulled out a rag, tipping a splash of water from my canteen onto the fabric. I cleaned up Gloam first, reverently wiping down his palm and fingers, then his chest and stomach, before quickly swiping over the head of my cock. I passed the rag to him in case he wanted to clean himself up between his legs more. I wouldn't have minded doing it, but I didn't know if he would find it too personal, and it wasn't like he could tell me to stop in time if he did.

My pants and underwear were still tucked snugly behind my balls, so I just had to gingerly push my sensitive junk back in and zip up. My skin was flushed and damp. I was too hot for once, so I grabbed my canteen and had a small sip of water to ease my parched throat.

By the time I settled back down next to Gloam, he was tucked back into his pants and holding the notebook.

You have to go, Adam. Please.

I couldn't lie—it hurt reading that just moments after what we'd done together. But I knew why he was saying it. He was worried for me. He was just trying to protect me.

I don't want to, I wrote back, scrambling for my discarded mask and shoving it on when my chin wavered. I didn't want to leave him.

I don't want you to either, but you have to.

I shook my head. *What about you?*

I will be fine. I am not the one in immediate danger. You are. You must leave.

God, he was right. I knew he was. If I stayed, I'd just be walking myself toward certain death. Or, if I agreed to join this cult, to a horrifying life of fear and cannibalism and watching people get roasted alive.

My eyes burned, but I ignored it.

I'm going to free you, I wrote. *I'll go, but I promise you I will find Mary's place and free you. I'll find a way.*

His fingers twitched where they held the edge of the notebook, and I wondered if this would be something he couldn't answer.

But eventually he wrote, *I don't want you to put yourself in any danger for me. Go back to your camp, Adam. Be safe and happy there.*

I shook my head resolutely, pressing my lips together hard beneath my mask.

I won't be happy if I know you're still like this. Not until you're free.

Why?

My breath caught. I knew he didn't mean to be callous, but after what had just happened, I couldn't help but feel a sting from the question.

Because you're important to me. I want YOU to be happy.

Gloam's breath shuddered out of him, and his free hand stole cautiously onto my leg. I covered it with my own, wrapping my fingers around his palm and squeezing.

You are important to me too, he wrote.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I didn’t leave soon enough.

You’re such an idiot, I shouted in my head as I ran, as fast as I could, through the trees. *You’re so stupid!*

I’d left Gloam at dawn, shivering in the cold air, so many things I wanted to say to him crowding my tongue, but I was too scared to get any of them out. I’d hugged him, pressing my face into his hard chest, breathing in his scent as his huge arms held me gently. My eyes had been burning when I eventually pulled away after too long and fixed my mask over my mouth.

I’d felt his gaze on me the whole time as I walked slowly away, back in the direction we’d come, my throat tight and aching, my breaths hitching in the early morning fog that still hung low to the ground, as the sun’s first rays appeared on the horizon.

When I made it to the edge of the forest we’d previously skirted around, I huddled at the base of a tree and sat there shivering for too long, trying very hard not to cry. I didn’t even know why I was so upset. It wasn’t like I’d known Gloam all that long. But the thought of him, still stuck there with Mary, was devastating.

It had been stupid to touch him the night before. Stupid, because now I knew what he looked like—sounded like—at his most vulnerable. I had touched the most intimate parts of him, and it hurt to leave him after that. It hurt to leave without seeing what we could have become.

I drifted off at some point, exhausted from not sleeping at all the night before, too on edge and jittery from what Gloam had told me—and the knowledge that I would have to leave. Part of me wanted to run back and take the risk with the Herald’s cult. But that was beyond stupid, I knew. That was a death wish because there was no way I’d be joining their “flock”.

I jolted awake, my clothing feeling damp from morning dew despite the sun being higher in the sky now. At first I didn’t know what had woken me so suddenly, but then I heard it.

I heard her.

“Hurry up!” Mary snapped, her voice echoing across the emptiness just outside of the forest. “We’ve already wasted time coming back this way. Find him! Bring him back! We need him!”

Pure terror gripped my insides, keeping me immobile long enough to hear the sound of heavy, pounding boots coming toward me. And the melodic tinkling of a long chain being dragged over the ground.

Oh fuck. I scrambled to my feet, cringing at how much noise I made, but it didn’t matter anyway. Gloam was heading right toward me. He already knew where I was. I could tell.

I took off in a sprint, winding through the thick forest, tripping over roots and hidden rocks but thankfully never stumbling enough to fall.

Why had I waited until morning to leave? Why had I fallen asleep under a fucking tree?

You’re such an idiot. *So stupid!*

I hated the fear I felt at the thought of Gloam catching me. Because I knew it wasn’t him—it was her. Her controlling him. But I didn’t know what that control would force him to do when he got me. Because he *would* get me, I could already tell. Despite his size, he was fast, and he was already catching up. I could hear him crashing through the trees, frighteningly close behind me.

Oh god, oh god. I tried to run faster, tried to duck and weave, thinking my smaller size would be my advantage, but he kept up. Not only kept up—he was still gaining ground between us.

Long fingers snagged my duffle, making my heart feel like it would explode as I jerked to a sudden stop with a pained grunt. I stumbled, my boot slipping over wet leaves, and landed hard on my hands and knees. When a big, unyielding grip cinched my ankle tight, my vision whited out with panic. I kicked back without second thought, hearing Gloam’s low grunt from just behind me as my boot connected with his arm. My throat caught on a pathetic little whimper at the thought of hurting him.

I crawled a few feet before reaching a tree, using its thick trunk to pull myself up and spin around, panting hard.

“P-please.”

I stared at him through horrified eyes as he advanced, his muscles bulging with tension, his chain wound around one thick forearm to stop it trailing over the forest floor. He didn’t have his war hammer with him, no doubt left abandoned by the RV so he could reach me quicker.

“Please, Gloam.” My voice caught as I begged. “Don’t.”

When there was just a foot of space between us and I had to crane my head back to stare at his cage, I saw his hulking body shudder.

He dropped to his knees before me, making me jump out of my skin. I stiffened when his big hands grasped my sides.

He tipped his caged head forward until the metal edge pressed into my stomach through my shirt. I couldn’t move—immobilised by fear and confusion—and Gloam didn’t move either. He was shaking wildly, like the effort of disobeying Mary even for a few seconds was taxing his body greatly, and I realised what this was. What he was doing.

He was asking for forgiveness. Because of what he had to do.

My breath shuddered out of me, still too fast. I couldn’t move anyway, caged by his thick arms, but I knew if I tried to run again, he would just come after me. He would have to. He wouldn’t be able to let me escape.

Strangely, the realisation calmed my frantically beating heart.

I took a deep breath.

“It’s okay, Gloam.” I reached down to smooth my palms over his broad shoulders, feeling the thick cables under his skin. “I know it’s not your fault.”

He made a low noise deep in his chest, pained and hoarse, and gripped my sides tighter. His caged head moved slowly from side to side, its hard edge digging into my skin.

“We’ll think of something,” I whispered, wishing I could palm the back of his head or cup his face. “We’ll be okay.”

Gloam shuddered, his big shoulders shaking under my palms. His posture was despondent when he eventually got to his feet, caged head hanging low.

The walk back through the forest to the RV was awful. For once, I didn’t try to fill the silence, not sure what I could say that would make Gloam feel better. And with every step closer, the realisation pounded through me like a sledgehammer.

You’re going to be eaten. You can’t escape.

I hated the fact that this was on Gloam’s shoulders. That *he* was the one who’d stopped me from leaving—because Mary had forced him to—which meant he’d be blaming himself for what was going to happen to me.

Mary was waiting on the bottom step of the RV when it came into view. When we finally reached it, she took a delicate step down onto the ground

and held out her hand imperiously.

When Gloam didn't move, her face went red.

"Give me the chain, *now*," she snapped.

After a long pause, Gloam unwound the chain from around his arm and handed the end to her.

"Where exactly do you think you were going?" she chirped as she tethered Gloam back to the RV, the snap of that huge, heavy padlock making me flinch.

I couldn't give away that I knew anything at all, which made indignation burn even hotter in my chest.

"I just changed my mind about working for you," I muttered. "And I didn't think you'd care, so I left when it got light."

Mary paused, as if realising she too had to be careful about what she said. Couldn't let me know she was taking me to potentially be eaten by a cult, after all.

"Well, we have a verbal contract now, pet. And I want you helping out at my menagerie. It's why I let you come with us in the first place."

Her voice was steely, no longer saccharine. The longer I was with her, the less she bothered with the front she'd initially put up at the camp.

"But now that I can no longer trust you, I'm going to have to take more drastic measures."

Fear made my stomach squeeze into a tight ball. "What—what do you mean?"

She ignored me, instead fixing her glare on Gloam. "Chain him to you. Do not let him leave again."

She looked back at me and smiled sweetly.

"We can rebuild the trust between us when we get to my place, pet. But until then, you understand, don't you? Besides, it's dangerous out here. There's no safer place to be than at the side of this hulking beast."

She waved a hand in Gloam's direction, snickering to herself as if she'd just told some clever inside joke for her own amusement.

After disappearing briefly inside the RV, Mary reappeared at the door and dropped a coil of chain carelessly on the ground.

"Do it," she barked at Gloam, before retreating back inside and slamming the door shut behind her.

His posture was defeated as he retrieved the chain. I didn't want to touch him for fear of Mary peering out at us through the windows, but as he got

close, I whispered, “Please don’t be sad, Gloam.”

He let out a miserable rumble in response, shackling my wrist to the chain and hooking the other end through his harness. The indignity of it burned, but at least I hadn’t been maimed like Gloam had. At least *my* captor would be kind and gentle, whereas his was a sadistic monster.

But in the end, it wouldn’t even matter. Because I couldn’t escape now. Which meant I was going to be meeting the Herald and their cannibal cult.

And I was going to be eaten.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The days somehow passed agonisingly slowly and terrifyingly fast at the same time as we made our way to wherever the Herald ran their secret cult. I had no sense of where we were anymore, the landscape around us empty and bleak, but the air was getting even colder.

I was still shackled to Gloam. He tried to give me as much privacy as he could when I needed the bathroom, but it was still humiliating. I could only hastily wash in the time it took him to fill the drum with water in a river or lake, which was no time at all. I was grimy and sweaty, and in a constant state of low-level panic. It didn't help that we couldn't talk during the day. I was stuck inside my own head, my thoughts growing increasingly more catastrophic.

Gloam was withdrawn. His shoulders were hunched with defeat, his posture clenched up and miserable, and I knew he was blaming himself for what would happen to me when we reached our destination.

And I could tell it was going to be soon. With every hour Gloam grew more tense, which made me wonder if we'd actually reach the location of the Herald's cult before nightfall.

In the end, we didn't, which loosened the tight knot of tension in my gut just a little. We stopped for the night at the edge of a forest, and for a long time after Gloam's evening chores were done, we just sat in silence in our usual spot, listening to the two borolesh strip the leaves from the branches for their meal.

My head was on Gloam's thick shoulder, and our hands were linked, resting on top of his thigh. I could feel the tension in his body still. It hadn't gone away once. I traced over the delicate veins on the back of his hand with my free one, staring down at it to try and block out the pressing blackness of the Wastes around us.

I lifted my head when Gloam shifted, leaning forward to retrieve our notebook from my duffle. For some reason, tonight, I was dreading what he'd write. Because I suspected it would be a goodbye of some kind. Something deep in my gut was telling me I'd be meeting the Herald tomorrow. Maybe my abuela had been right about my intuition.

You must join them when we get there, Gloam wrote, and my stomach churned with nausea as I read the words.

I can't. My handwriting was shaky. *I can't eat people. I can't watch people get roasted alive.*

If you do not, YOU will be roasted alive, Adam. Gloam was trembling. *You will be eaten. You will die.*

My panicked breaths whistled through my nose behind my mask, and my eyes prickled with heat.

"I don't want to die, Gloam," I whispered out loud, my voice soft and wobbly with terror. "I'm scared."

Letting out a low sound of distress, he scribbled hurriedly.

Join them. Please. At least you'll be alive. I won't

A shaky breath echoed in his cage before he resumed writing with trembling fingers.

I won't be able to bear it if you are dead.

I bit down on my lip to hold back the weak sob that wanted to escape. Blinking hard to try and shift the blurriness obscuring my vision, I realised Gloam had written more.

Forgive me.

I scrambled up and launched myself into his lap, straddling his hips to get as close to him as possible. Gloam shuddered as his big arms wrapped around me. The chain connecting us rattled softly, trailing over the ground.

"This isn't your fault," I croaked against the base of his neck. "None of this is your fault, Gloam. *I'm* the one who insisted on coming out here. Mary's the one taking me to the Herald. I know you can't stop it. I know you would if you could."

He held me even tighter, his cage brushing the side of my head. I squeezed my eyes shut as I buried my masked nose deeper into the bend of his neck. A single tear managed to escape, dripping onto his grey skin.

Gloam gently tugged me back, and I could feel his eyes on my face in the low light from our lantern. He reached up and wiped the wetness away with a gentle thumb, then slowly unhooked my mask from behind my ear. It hung there from the other as we stared at each other. Then that thumb drifted down and brushed, achingly soft, over my mouth.

My next breath shuddered out of me.

"I wish I could kiss you." My voice was hoarse with longing. "I wish I could see your face, just once. I'm so sorry I won't get to free you, Gloam."

He gave a sharp jerk of his head, telling me that wasn't important to him, but it was to me. It was what I wanted more than anything, and I wasn't going to be able to do it. Even if I *did* agree to join the cult rather than die at their hands, I wouldn't be able to help Gloam. I'd be stuck there. Forced to eat human flesh and worship a monster.

I buried myself back into his chest and didn't move all night.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Herald's cult had made its home in an old shopping mall.

I stared up at it as we slowly approached, my legs shaking wildly when I realised that this was the place we'd been travelling toward. This was the place where I was most likely going to die.

It was a strange thing to know—that you were walking directly toward your doom. My feet wanted to freeze in place, as if that would help me. I couldn't stop trembling, and I could feel the tension vibrating from Gloam's frame beside me.

Even though I knew it was pointless—that he wasn't the one doing this—a small, weak part of me wanted to cling to his arm and beg him to stop this. Beg him to keep me safe, to not leave me here to die.

But he couldn't. Gloam was even more helpless as I was.

The parking lot was littered with old cars, but otherwise it was clean out here, like someone was keeping up with the maintenance. Once we were in the shadow of the huge building, Mary poked her head out of the window and ordered Gloam to stop the borolesh. He did it reluctantly, and this time he didn't move to comfort them like he normally would when we stopped. This time he stayed beside me, a wall of tense muscle.

There was an ornate glass dome on top of the mall, too coated in grime to reflect the weak late morning sunlight shining down from above. I stared at it, trying to ignore the big front doors directly in front of us. They were glass too, but it looked like they'd been covered on the inside with long fabric drapes, blocking out whatever horrific things took place within.

My eyes snapped back to the RV when its door opened and Mary stepped out wearing an immaculate white dress with a stiff matching jacket. She looked like a narcissistic mother of the bride on the way to a wedding, not an evil woman holding monsters hostage and forcing people to choose between joining a cult or getting eaten alive.

Why are you doing this? I wanted to scream at her, but fear had closed my throat up. *How are you even worse than we ever imagined? How can you think this is okay?*

Her watery eyes were bright with excitement, plump cheeks flushed. She smoothed a hand down her dress before lifting something to her face.

I stared as she carefully pulled the strap of a mask over her puffed up, blow-dried hair, securing it to her head. It was a full-face mask, pale and smooth, depicting a face so different to Mary's that it took me a moment to fully register the details.

This was a narrow, angular face with cutting cheekbones and tilted eye sockets. Mary's own shadowed eyes blinked at me from within them. The mouth was small and full, the nose narrow and sharp, and although the features were largely human in appearance, I could tell that this was a likeness of something that definitely was not.

I was guessing that this was the face of the Herald.

I wasn't sure what I had expected the Herald to look like. I hadn't given it much thought—it wasn't particularly high on my list of concerns. And they were a monster, which meant they could look like anything.

Would everyone in there be wearing masks? Was I expected to wear one like this too?

Mary didn't hand me one, though. She bent down to pick up her pet shulc, which had skittered down the steps behind her, before straightening up and turning her masked face toward me.

I swallowed hard.

"You're probably wondering what we're doing here."

The sickly-sweet voice was back, and it was breathless with anticipation. Mary gestured at the mall behind her with one hand, the other holding the shulc close to her chest.

"This isn't my home, pet. This is somewhere far greater. This is a wonderful place. I decided to bring you here—to give you this incredible gift."

I was already breathing too fast, and my whole body was trembling with fear.

"Wh-what gift?" I forced out between stiff lips, because Mary couldn't find out that Gloam had already told me everything.

I dreaded to think what she would do to him if she knew.

She let out a tinkling laugh. "You'll see."

Those watery blue eyes hardened within the mask's eye holes as they turned to Gloam.

"Keep hold of him," she barked, before marching over to the padlock and unlocking Gloam's chain from the side of the RV.

This time, though, she didn’t let it drop to the ground. This time, she kept hold of the end of it, a true display of ownership, and breezed past us to lead the way inside.

Gloam’s grip was gentle when it circled my arm, and I could feel the apology in the light squeeze of his fingers as he urged me forward. I went, because I didn’t want Mary to get too far ahead and yank on the chain that connected to those rings in his back. Gloam and I were still tethered by the chain looping from my wrist to his harness, giving me no chance of making a final run for it, but Mary’s order compelled him to hold onto me anyway.

The doors were thrown open before we reached them, making me jump, and a person whose face was covered by the same mask as Mary appeared between them. They were wearing a simple white dress, and their feet were bare as they took a single step beyond the mall’s threshold.

“The Herald welcomes you, follower Mary.”

Their voice was low and soft. Soothing, if it hadn’t been coming from a cannibalistic cult member.

“And I welcome the chance to bask in their glorious presence.”

My lungs stuttered when Mary half-turned and gestured at me.

“I bring a gift. A new coal to be offered the chance at a better life.”

The masked head dipped in a graceful nod. “The Herald will be most pleased with your dedication.”

What the fuck was this? Why were they talking like this? I wanted to laugh hysterically at this ridiculous play-acting, at the way they were trying to legitimise this fucked up operation with pompous, archaic dialogue.

Was this what happened to some humans when they were left without true guidance for long enough? When everything around them crumbled and their carefully crafted world and belief systems turned to dust? Were they so desperate for some form of structure, to be told what to do and how to act, that they would willingly sink to these levels?

This person in front of us was another human, I could tell that even with the mask. Didn’t they *care* that they were looking at someone they’d potentially be eating soon? Didn’t being forced to consume human flesh make them utterly despise themself?

Of all the fucked up stories I’d heard about the Wastes, all the things I’d learned went on out here over the years, this was the worst.

“Please follow me.”

The masked cult member turned and glided serenely back inside. Mary tugged on Gloam's chain with impatience as she followed, into the dim depths of the building. I was ashamed of the whimper that escaped me when Gloam and I stepped over the threshold, because I didn't want to show her any fear.

The front entrance of the former mall had been completely covered with a thick, soft fabric that I somehow knew hadn't originated in this world. Its texture looked unnatural to my eyes, and as we walked forward its soft white colouring shifted with purples and greys.

Where the lobby would have widened into the main atrium of the mall, more fabric had been erected, creating a curtain that blocked off whatever was beyond. The atmosphere was hushed but thick, and my body instinctively knew that there were people behind that curtain. A lot of people.

The cult member pushed it back with a dip of their head, waiting at the side for us to pass through. The big space within was dim, more fabric draping down in huge swathes from that domed skylight above. The only light came from burning torches and hundreds of candles that lined the edges of the space, the rows of former stores hidden behind curtains.

My heart spasmed with fear when hundreds of faces, all wearing the exact same mask, turned toward us at our entrance. They sat in a ring around what had once been a fountain, but that had been ripped out. In its place was a glowing pit of coals with a red-hot metal spit above.

There was a clear path leading directly to that firepit in front of us, flanked on either side by rows of silent, masked people, all wearing white. Movement up ahead drew my horrified gaze, and through the shimmering heat rising from the pit, I could make out a tall, statuesque figure standing on a raised platform. There were two taller, broader figures either side of them, like hulking bodyguards.

"Follower Mary."

I flinched when a clear, pleasant voice rang out across the cavernous silent room.

"This is an unexpected visit, but a welcome one," it continued.

Mary preened at being addressed directly by the Herald—because this was surely the Herald—in front of the entire congregation.

"Yes, Almighty Herald. I have brought a new coal to receive your gift."

"Wonderful. Please, bring them closer."

My boots planted hard into the smooth tiled floor, knees trembling. Gloam's hand was still around my arm, and I felt his fingers tighten. Neither of us moved.

"Bring him," Mary said, tugging on his chain as she swept forward and sashayed down the aisle created by the Herald's silent followers.

Toward that burning pit.

Gloam's hand was trembling where it gripped my arm, but the compulsion—and the chain in Mary's hand—forced him to lead me forward. His other hand still gripped his war hammer tight, the massive head of it dragging over the ground. All those blank-masked faces turned as one to follow our procession. The air in front of my face grew warm as we got closer to the firepit.

We circled around it to reach the other side and the rising heat was unbearable this close. Sweat beaded immediately inside my leather mask and over my forehead, but I couldn't stop shivering despite the blast of hot air pummelling me. I swore I could smell the rancid, nose-stinging odour of burning flesh and hair, but the pit was empty save for a small, unidentifiable patch of charred remains in the very centre. For a second, I thought I was going to throw up.

Smoothly, the Herald glided down from their dais to meet us, their two big bodyguards following in silence. When they stepped into the low light, I stared up at them in terrified, morbid fascination.

Their hair was long and white, half of it tied back from their face in complicated braids. Their androgynous face was almost too perfect—too beautiful—and oddly familiar. But that could have just been the nature of their appearance—it was somehow like no one else alive, and a million other people all at once. Blank enough to be forgettable, but I knew there was no way I would ever, ever forget it as I stared up at them.

Their skin was ghostly pale, but covered in faint pink scales that caught the flickering firelight and the glow from the coals behind me, which were burning into my back. They wore long, loose robes made of the same fabric that was draped everywhere, its blank whiteness shifting with hues of purple and grey with the Herald's gentle movements.

They were staring down at me, their pale, pinkish-grey eyes so intense and unnatural that I had to look away. When I did, my gaze caught on one of the two silent beings standing a step behind them, and my entire body froze with shock.

They were like Gloam.

They were wearing the same masks as everyone else, but I would recognise that grey skin tone and thick, cabled ridging winding over their skin anywhere. They wore the same kind of leather pants that Gloam did, but no harnesses were looped over their thick shoulders. One of them held a huge, thick-handled mace with a round head covered in deadly spikes, and the other gripped a double-bladed greataxe. Both weapons were as big and unwieldy as Gloam's war hammer.

In the low glow of the firelight, I couldn't see their eyes through their masks' eye holes, but I could tell that they weren't looking at me. Either of them.

Their heads were tilted further up, and they were looking at Gloam.

Were these his brothers?

I wanted to turn to him but didn't dare. Had they been captured too? By the Herald, not Mary? But they weren't wearing cages. There was no additional bulk behind those masks.

Were they here *willingly?*

My eyes darted as I tried to understand. Had Mary… Had Mary found the three brothers and gifted two of them to the Herald, but kept Gloam for herself as a slave? But why would she do that? Why wouldn't she want *three* big, powerful aytorin protecting her? Was she really that desperate to please the Herald?

Why weren't the other two helping Gloam?

They didn't move, as still as he usually was, and remained behind the Herald. But they were still watching him, I could tell. Their heads only shifted when the Herald spoke loudly, making me jump out of my skin.

"Welcome, coal." Their voice was smooth and non-distinct, like it was designed to make you forget what they'd said just moments after they said it. "You will be offered a great gift here today."

The Herald swept out an arm, their heavy sleeve swinging with the movement and shifting between white and purple and grey. Curving grey claws tipped their overly long fingers.

"Choose to join us, and you will be given the chance to witness the dawn of a new, glorious age. You will transcend from your lowly mortal state into something greater. Holier."

I was shivering so violently that Gloam struggled to keep his grip on me, fingers tightening in a silent, painful message.

“If you refuse, your body will be cleansed by my holy fire and sacrificed to nourish this congregation.”

What a fancy way of saying they were going to burn me alive and eat me. I was breathing too hard, the hot air and damp, oppressive heat within my leather mask making me lightheaded alongside the crippling panic.

Instinct was telling me to accept—to keep myself alive in whatever way I could. But I would lose my mind if I had to stay here. If I had to eat people and worship this terrifyingly blank creature. I would have to look at Gloam’s two brothers every day and know that I had failed him, that I would never see him again. That he was still stuck out there with Mary, living a miserable existence in her servitude.

“Remove his chain and step back,” Mary said, and I tensed when Gloam’s long fingers trailed down the sleeve of my jacket before letting go to undo the shackle around my wrist.

He stepped away, his big body fighting it, the chain that was now clutched in his hand clinking softly against the tiled floor. I stood there shivering, the loss of his warmth at my side an ache I felt deep in my bones.

The Herald gestured to a nearby cult member sitting obediently on their folded legs, and they scrambled up to obey, stepping forward and removing the mask from my face with surprisingly gentle hands. Brown eyes peered into mine from behind their own mask, and seeing the glaring reminder of the twisted humanity in this room made me shudder with horror.

This person was probably going to be consuming me soon.

They removed the duffle from my back and stepped away, dipping their head subserviently at the Herald before waiting off to the side, still watching me.

A rush of saliva filled my mouth, and I swallowed hard around the lump in my throat. “Pl-please—”

“Turn to face your fate, coal,” the Herald interrupted.

My exposed mouth trembled, and I shook my head. “Please—”

“Turn him,” Mary barked at Gloam when I didn’t move, my feet glued to the floor.

He stepped forward to obey her, and I heard his breath hitch under his cage as his gentle hands spun me. I blinked rapidly, struggling to adjust to the glow and the searing heat from the pit. Beyond it, I could just make out the blurry sea of blank white faces all turned toward me, watching and waiting silently.

The pit was just a few paces in front of me. I thought I could see a small scrap of meat sizzling softly on the red-hot spit stretching over it.

"Your fate," the Herald announced from behind me, their clear voice ringing out across the silent hall. "Either join us—join this congregation and take your place among my flock—or embrace my cleansing fires to be purified and blessed as nourishment for our bodies."

How many people had been in my position? There were hundreds of faces out there. Did the majority accept to avoid being burned alive, or was this just a small fraction of the people who had been brought here to make this decision?

How many humans had these people eaten?

My breaths shuddered out of me. My knees were trembling, so weak I didn't think I was going to be able to stand for much longer. I wished I could have looked at Gloam one last time, but he was standing behind me now, with Mary and the Herald. And his brothers.

Would they try to free him? Would they help him?

My eyes burned, but the air was too searingly dry for tears to form. Did I refuse and force Gloam to watch me die and get eaten, when there was nothing he could do to stop it? Or did I accept and stay here to live a horrific, shameful life of cannibalism?

"Choose, coal."

The Herald's voice held a touch of impatience now, and I realised I had run out of time. I was sure that if I took too long, they would push me into that firepit anyway.

I'm sorry for failing you, Gloam. I'm sorry, Ghost, for being such a shitty friend. I'm sorry, mama, for being so stupid and getting kicked out of the city.

I closed my eyes and pictured them all, because either way, I'd never see any of them again.

My insides shrivelled up with guilt and shame when I finally got out, "I ch-choose to join."

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A moment of heavy silence followed my words, and in it, I wondered which option the Herald had been hoping I'd take. Were they more concerned with swelling their ranks, or did they just have an insatiable craving for human flesh?

"That is wonderful," they eventually said. "Please, turn to face me once more."

When I did, on shaky legs that could barely hold my weight, I saw Gloam's body sagging with a mixture of relief and utter hopelessness. My eyes blurred. At least I'd gotten to see him one last time before he was gone forever, and I was stuck here worshipping this blank-faced monster.

"This lost coal has chosen the path of enlightenment," the Herald announced in their clear voice to the room. "They have taken the first step on their journey to become something greater. To a life with true meaning in these uncertain times."

I jumped when the low murmur of hundreds of voices rumbled under my boots.

"Praise the Almighty Herald."

"We will have a ceremony to welcome him tonight," the Herald said, lacing impossibly long fingers together in a serene pose. "Until then, resume your quiet worship before your daily chores. And if our missionaries find other lost coals out there in the coming hours, we may be welcoming more than one into our flock tonight. Or we may be partaking in a holy feast. In either case, this is a joyous day. Bask in it. Be grateful."

What was going to happen to me now? What would happen during the ceremony later? Would I have to wear one of those masks with the likeness of the Herald's face?

I stood trembling, unable to move, my entire body straining with the overwhelming desire to run to Gloam and bury myself against his chest. To feel his arms around me, keeping me safe. But I couldn't, and he couldn't. We would never be able to touch again.

I hoped I would be able to keep our notebook, so at least I could read it and remember my time with him. But I very much doubted I'd be able to keep a single thing. They'd already taken my mask and bag. They would

strip everything away from me until I was just another faceless follower behind a mask depicting the Herald's eerie features. No longer a real person, just a mindless zombie in almost every sense of the word.

"Are you staying for the ceremony, follower Mary?" the Herald asked, voice quieter as the congregation behind us murmured softly in unison.

She dipped her head in a brief bow.

"I'm afraid that I cannot, my Almighty. I must get back. The military is arriving soon to inspect the latest addition to my collection, which I was unfortunately unable to acquire." Her tone was mildly sheepish, but she couldn't quite hide the petulant anger that coloured it. "I will have to be there to meet them."

"And how are your efforts going with the military?"

I blinked and forced my eyes to remain facing forward, even though I was desperate to look over at Mary as she answered. Her efforts with the military?

"Excellent, my Almighty, I promise." Her tone was gushing, so sweet and ingratiating that my lip curled in disgust.

"Good." The Herald's voice was dismissive, as if they had grown bored of talking to her. "Take him to the cleansing chamber to be prepared for the ceremony."

The follower who had removed my mask and bag stepped forward, still holding both, and took my arm in a gentle grip with their free hand. My heart leapt into my throat, panic rising again, and I twisted to look over my shoulder at Gloam as I was led away.

He was watching me back through the cage, his shoulders hunched and hands clenched into tight fists. Before I stepped out of sight, through a heavy curtain the follower held back, I saw his huge chest shudder with grief.

My panicked breaths were loud and harsh as the curtain dropped behind us, blocking out the muted roar and crackle of the firepit in the main room. The cult member didn't say a word, but kept hold of me as they led me through a door that still bore a sign stating NO UNAUTHORISED PERSONNEL ALLOWED.

I flinched when it slammed shut behind us. Fabric didn't cover the plain white walls back here, and lit torches had been secured every few yards, their flickering glow causing orange light to dance as we made our way down the narrow, echoing corridor.

I jumped when the cult member finally spoke.

“Are you pleased to be joining the flock?” they asked quietly, voice low. It sounded like a young man, but I couldn’t be certain.

I trembled wildly at the reminder, panic speeding up my breaths.

“N-no,” I said before I could stop myself, then immediately clenched up with fear at the possible repercussions.

Maybe this person would turn and march me back out into the main room to tell the Herald, who would immediately throw me into the pit.

I briefly considered ripping my arm free and making a run for it, but the only way I knew out was through those big front doors. I’d have to get past everyone to make it. The Herald, Mary, Gloam, his brothers. The entire congregation. There wasn’t a chance in hell of me getting anywhere near the exit.

The cult member made a soft sound in their throat, and their grip tightened on my arm.

“Did you know you were coming here?” they asked, just as quietly as before.

“No.”

I had, but not until it was too late. It wasn’t like I’d had a choice, which was what I assumed they were asking.

“Would you rather be back out there? In the Wastes?”

What was with all these fucking questions? Was this a tactic they employed to break a person’s spirit? Remind them that they were stuck here, even if they didn’t want to be?

“Yes,” I grated, anger chasing away some of the fear. “I’d rather take my chances in the Wastes any day over this.”

They let out a soft breath and fell silent. Soon, they were bringing me to a stop and opening a plain white door to our left, ushering me through.

It had been a janitor’s office in its former life, I was pretty sure. The faint scent of industrial cleaning products still lingered, despite the room having been cleared at some point. All that was in here now was a clothing rail along one wall—probably taken from an old store—with a collection of plain white clothes hanging neatly from wire hangers.

The old, plumbed in sink was still there, the stainless steel dull and dented. Beside it sat a wicker laundry hamper with a stack of neatly folded towels and washcloths on top.

The follower let go of my arm to turn and shut the door behind us. I spun to face them, wary of having them at my back. They were already watching me through their mask.

“Would you leave if you could?” they asked in that same hushed voice.

Helpless fury made me go hot all over.

“Of course I fucking would. What’s with all these damn questions? It’s not like I have a choice now, is it?”

“Shh.”

The cult member glanced at the door behind them before taking a step closer. I heard them swallow and saw the prominent Adam’s apple bob in their throat.

“I can get you out.”

I froze, the anger draining from me, replaced by shock. “What?”

“I can help you escape, but we have to do it before the ceremony.” Their voice was tinged with worry, and they kept glancing back at the door as though scared someone would burst through it.

“Is this a trick?”

My paranoia made me ask. Was it a test? If I accepted, would I be burned alive anyway?

“No, it’s not a trick,” they hissed impatiently. “And we don’t have much time.”

I stared at them, heart pounding.

“Then—then why? Why would you help me? Don’t you… believe the Herald? Isn’t that why you’re here?”

They shook their head, then abruptly reached up and yanked off their mask. A young, masculine face looked up at me, with pale blond hair shorn close to the head, wide brown eyes and freckles dusted over their nose and cheeks. My stomach twisted at the sight. They looked so young.

“My parents were some of the Herald’s first followers.” Bitterness coated their words now. “I’m one of the few who’s been born here. A true son of the Herald.”

He snorted without humour, then looked at me again with anguished eyes.

“I hate it. I hate what they make us do here.”

My throat bobbed, nausea rising. He’d been born here, in this sick place. He couldn’t have been any older than twenty, then. He was just a kid, and

his parents were forcing him to live here and eat human flesh and worship a monster.

"I'm—I'm sorry," I rasped, feeling like I had to say something. But there was nothing I could possibly say that would make it better.

He shook his head sharply.

"It doesn't matter. I'm—I want to help you. I want to get you out. You don't deserve this."

Hope rose like a tidal wave inside me, but I pushed it back.

"Won't they find out? What—what will happen to you if they realise?"

"They won't. And if they do, I don't care what they do to me." His voice was painfully flat, and my throat bobbed again at his words.

"If you can get me out, come with me." I took a step closer but resisted the urge to grip his narrow shoulder. "I'm—I live in a camp to the east. You can come with me—"

"I can't." He shook his head, mouth twisting. "I have the mark. If I try to leave, they'll just bring me back."

My breath caught. "What mark?"

"The mark of the Herald. You'll be given it tonight in the ceremony, and then you won't be able to leave without the Herald's permission—ever—which is why we need to get you out before then."

I looked around the room. The only way out was the door we'd come through, back into that corridor.

"How?"

"From the roof. We'll have to climb up the service elevator shaft to the top floor. It's the only way up there. And we'll have to be very quiet, because the Herald's private chambers are in the main part of the top floor."

"How am I meant to get down from the roof?" I asked faintly, already feeling myself get lightheaded at the thought of climbing up an elevator shaft.

"The fire escape. The ladder's still there."

"How can you be sure?" I hissed, terrified at the thought of being stuck up there with no way down.

"I sit up there a lot." He shrugged with a tiny, rueful smile. "Stupid, I know. Just torturing myself."

My heart ached for him.

"Are you sure you can't come with me? How can this mark actually stop you from leaving?"

“I don’t know how it works, it just does. I’ve seen lots of people try to escape over the years. They never make it farther than the parking lot before collapsing. And then they’re punished.”

God, what the fuck was going on here?

“So no one can ever leave?” I whispered. “The mark physically stops them from leaving somehow?”

“Not without the Herald’s permission. They give the missionaries permission to go out there to find new coals, like the one you came here with. Mary.”

Unspeakable rage flooded me at the mention of her name. This was all her fault. All of it. And she had probably already left, taking my big grey beastie with her.

God. My poor Gloam. I couldn’t even imagine what he was feeling right now.

I focused on the young man in front of me.

“What’s your name?”

His sombre expression brightened, and I wondered if this was the first time in his life that he’d ever been anything but a faceless cult member.

“Samson.”

I forced a wobbly smile onto my face. “That’s a nice name.”

“What’s yours?” He took a step closer, voice eager and brown eyes pleading for normal social interaction. I doubted he got much of that here.

“Rig.” I wasn’t going to tell him my real name, as innocent and nice as he seemed.

“Rig,” he repeated with a determined nod. “Okay, Rig. Are you ready to do this?”

I stilled. “What—now?”

Samson nodded. “It’s too dangerous to wait. When morning worship is over, there’ll be people everywhere. We need to go now.”

“Fuck. Okay.” I took a deep breath. “I’m ready.”

Samson held out my bag and mask, bending down to retrieve his own when I took them. I calmed a little once my mask was back in place, feeling more in control, and slung my duffle over my shoulder.

“Stay silent,” Samson whispered, and at my nod he turned to ease open the door.

The corridor was still empty and quiet when we slipped out of the room. I closed the door behind me softly, hopefully giving the appearance that I

was still in there to anyone who passed. I followed Samson further down the corridor until we reached the old service elevator.

When he bent down, I realised there was a small piece of metal wedged between the doors, keeping them open just enough for him to fit his fingers through. He looked up at me.

“Can you help me open them?” he whispered, and I grabbed onto the door nearest to me so he could remove the makeshift wedge, no doubt making sure it didn’t get kicked into the empty shaft.

He curled his fingers around the edge of the other door, and together we forced them open. The metal squealed a little but Samson didn’t seem concerned, so I forced myself not to peer behind me anxiously.

Gesturing at me to follow him, Samson carefully leaned over to grab onto the service ladder in the shaft. I peered over the edge and could see the top of the old elevator a couple of floors below us, sitting in its final resting place at the lowest level of the basement.

It wasn’t a huge drop, but enough to make my limbs jerky as I followed Samson onto the ladder. He was already climbing up fast, his bare feet silent, but I had to move slower to make sure my boots didn’t come down too hard on the metal steps. Sound echoed well in here.

My heart was racing as we climbed, and I kept my eyes fixed firmly on the grey metal wall through the ladder steps in front of me so I didn’t look up and lose my balance, or down and go lightheaded at the sight of the drop.

The elevator doors on the top floor were already wedged open, and Samson scrambled up and briefly out of sight before his head reappeared. He held out an arm to help me up the rest of the way.

I wanted to thank him, but didn’t dare speak as we crept along another plain white corridor, this one smelling old and mildewy. It was colder up here, and brighter. Light was actually coming in through the single window at the end of the hall, and I could see blue sky outside.

We walked quickly up three short flights of metal stairs before reaching the big, heavy fire exit door that led to the roof. Samson pushed on the metal bar and held the door open, making sure it didn’t swing out and bang against the bricks as he ushered me through.

After dragging over a cinder block to prop the door open, he straightened and shoved his mask up to rest on the top of his head, taking a deep breath as his eyes closed.

Then they popped back open, hard with determination.

"Come on."

He led me to the far side of the roof at the back of the mall. Beyond it sat a sprawling forest, and the peaceful sound of the trees rustling in the breeze drifted over to us. It was cold up here. I shivered, pulling my western jacket tighter around me.

The sun was still high in the sky. It had been no time at all since I'd first set foot in this place. I wondered if Mary and Gloam had already left, and if they had, how far away they were.

Would I be able to track them down?

Because I *was* still going to free Gloam. I was more determined now than ever.

I followed Samson along the lip of the building until he stopped and pointed at an old fire escape ladder bolted to the side. I swallowed nervously. That thing didn't look safe.

"It's the only way down." Samson's voice was rueful, as if he knew what I was thinking.

I swallowed again. "O-okay."

When I didn't move, he crossed his arms and cocked a brow at me.

"Well go on then."

I turned to face the ladder, but indecision warred, making me freeze in place. I swung back around to face Samson.

"Please come with me," I begged.

What would happen to him? What would the Herald do if they realised he had helped me escape?

He shook his head. "I told you, I can't."

"Surely there's—"

"There isn't, Rig." He gave me a small smile. "Trust me. I would have left years ago if I could."

I swallowed. "But—"

"You have to go. Now." His smile turned bitter. "Don't worry. The Herald won't hurt me."

"How do you know?" I asked desperately. I didn't think I'd be able to stand it if this kid died because of me.

"They just won't." He nodded at the ladder. "Go."

I remained frozen for a few more seconds, but in the end, self-preservation won out. Samson had already risked so much getting me this

far. I wasn’t going to make it all in vain.

“Thank you so much,” I said as I carefully climbed onto the ladder with shaking legs. “I don’t—”

“I know.” Samson stood there watching me, his mask still pushed up over his short hair. “It was good to meet you, Rig. Be safe.”

I took one last look at him standing there on the roof, before lowering my gaze to concentrate on making my way down the ladder. It was ancient, rusted and creaking ominously under my boots. I was used to heights, thanks to the camp wall, but I still trembled wildly with fear as I descended. One wrong move and I’d plummet to the concrete below.

Halfway down, I glanced back up. I couldn’t see Samson anymore, and I assumed he’d gone back inside before anyone realised he was missing.

It was silent out here, and I was still high enough for the wind to whistle past my ears, ruffling my hair. An errant curl got into my eyes, and I jerked my head to get rid of it, not used to it being this long. My stomach bottomed out with terror when the action made me wobble on the rusty ladder, which shook as though its bolts were mere moments away from coming loose.

I started moving down quicker, my thighs trembling and weirdly weak with fear. But adrenaline pushed me onward, and I could’ve cried when my boots touched the hard concrete. Knees wobbly, I cast one look around to make sure there were no cult members lurking out there.

Then I ran.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I didn’t catch up to the RV until early evening.

They couldn’t have left the cult all that much before Samson helped me escape, but I’d spent too long sprinting wildly and aimlessly through the forest, my only concern getting far away from that place.

By the time I finally slowed, gasping for breath, I realised with sickening dread that I’d have to go back to get my bearings. I made my way back to the edge of the forest, then crept along slowly and carefully until the mall reappeared, my heart pounding as I stayed among the trees until I could see the parking lot and the direction we’d come from. They must not have known I was gone yet, because it was quiet outside the building, not a single cult member in sight.

I sprinted madly away, my duffle banging into my back with every pounding step and my heart in my throat at how exposed I was. When the mall was finally out of sight, I slowed my pace to try and spot any tracks on the ground from the RV or the borolesh’s heavy steps. Then I started running again.

I ran for as long as I could, but I was already crashing from my wild, adrenaline-fuelled dash through the thick forest. Thanks to too many years spent taking it easy in the safety of the camp, my stamina wasn’t great like Ghost’s, despite my endless days of walking with Gloam.

I was proud of myself for managing to track the RV’s tyre prints, though. They vanished occasionally, but I could see the thick lines of flattened grass and their tread over the hard-packed ground, until I reached a road and they were gone entirely.

Swallowing hard, I started following the road, praying it would lead me to them. I was a nervous wreck, convinced a giant millipede was going to burst out of the ground in front of me, or a huge slavering beast would appear on the horizon and start sprinting madly toward me. I didn’t know if I’d be able to run anymore if that happened. I was exhausted, my boots dragging over the asphalt with each step.

When I reached more woodland, I started walking just inside its perimeter, feeling a little less exposed that way. The sun was low in the sky, a big burning semi-circle of fire, when I finally spotted the RV up ahead.

Heart pounding, I darted behind a tree and peered out. They'd stopped for the night—recently, by the looks of it, because I could see Gloam comforting the borolesh, which was normally the first thing he did before Mary appeared and started barking orders at him. They could reach the trees, so he wouldn't have to come into the forest to snap off branches for them. I just had to hope Mary needed more water.

Gloam was miserable. I could see it in the despondent slope of his shoulders. The way his caged head hung low even as he was trying to comfort the borolesh. Mary stuck her head out of the RV window and barked something at him, and he dragged his feet as he made his way back to the side of the vehicle.

My chin trembled as I watched him. Poor Gloam. He would be torturing himself. I knew he believed himself to be responsible for what had happened, but he'd been helpless. More helpless than me, because he could be controlled with a simple command.

When he lifted the side compartment of the RV and pulled out the big drum to collect water, my stomach quivered with excitement. There was no visible water source that I could see, which meant he'd be coming into the forest to find a stream or lake.

Mary emerged from the RV, still in her fancy white clothes, and stomped over to remove his chain as though it was a burden he forced on her, not the other way around. Rage burned in me at the sight of her. In that moment, I wished I was ruthless like Lilac. I wished I had it in me to find a big branch and sneak into her RV unexpectedly to bash her brains in.

After placing his war hammer down against the side of the motorhome and winding his chain around his arm, Gloam made his way into the trees, dragging the drum behind him. He didn't try to soften his footsteps, his big boots crushing twigs and crunchy leaves as he walked. I'd wondered before if he could smell water, even with the cage, because he always seemed to be able to find it.

I followed him quietly, not wanting to risk Mary knowing I was here. That I wasn't back at the cult, being forced to eat human flesh. I followed Gloam deeper into the forest, his footsteps slow and dragging, until not even a hint of the RV's dull metal exterior was visible through the trees.

I was shaking with anticipation, tempted to break into a run so I could reach him quicker, but I didn't know what else was in these woods.

Knowing my luck, I'd be taken down by a wild animal or beastie when I was mere feet from him if I made too much noise.

I could hear the gentle rush of a river up ahead, and by the time I snuck between two trees at the edge of a small clearing, Gloam was already standing beside it, the drum abandoned on the ground next to him. His head was bent low, and it looked like he was just staring into the water. Then his shoulders heaved with a great, shuddering sob that sounded raspy and rough within the cage.

My vision got blurry in an instant.

"Gloam," I croaked, stumbling toward him, already reaching out.

He jumped out of his skin, an action that looked strange on his strong, steady frame. His caged head whipped toward me, and then he stilled in utter shock.

I literally launched myself at him, wrapping all my limbs around his sturdy body and clinging on with every bit of strength I possessed.

"Gloam," I said again, unable to say anything else, my voice wobbly as I struggled to hold back tears.

We'd been apart for less than a day, but it felt so much longer. I'd been convinced that I would never see him again, and now I was in his arms, and I could feel his big strong body trembling against mine.

A harsh, desperate noise ripped from his chest, and then he was squeezing me tight, almost too tight, his cage digging into the side of my head. In that moment, I wanted to hear his voice more than anything, but I settled for breathing in his metal-tinged scent after ripping off my mask and discarding it carelessly on the forest floor.

For once, no other words came to me. I was just so relieved that I was with him again, that I was alive and not at the mercy of a false prophet with a taste for human flesh. Gloam didn't seem capable of doing much more than holding me tight in his arms, his body still shaking wildly.

"I missed you," I finally choked out, which was ridiculous—it had been hours—but it was true.

I pulled back enough to press frantic kisses all over his shoulder and collarbone, feeling those thick, raised ridges catching against my lips.

Still holding me up, my legs twined around his waist, Gloam stepped away from the edge of the river on unsteady feet. I couldn't stop kissing him, but eventually he gently set me down and cupped my face between big, wildly shaking hands.

“I m-m-managed to escape,” I told him, my voice stuttering as the adrenaline pumping through my body converged with sheer relief. “O-one of them h-helped me. And then I f-followed you.”

Gloam made a soft noise in his throat and stroked his thumbs over my cheeks, his touch calming my frantically racing heart. He gently removed the duffle slung over my shoulder and dropped to his knees to unzip it with trembling fingers. I lowered myself on weak legs as he pulled out our notebook.

Then he simply wrote, *Adam,* his normally elegant handwriting shaky.

I sobbed and launched myself into his arms again, burying my face against his shoulder.

“I’m still going to free you,” I told him, my voice muffled against his grey skin. “I’m not giving up.”

Gloam made a rough noise in his throat and pulled back to write again.

That’s not important. You’re alive. You’re here. I can’t put into words how I feel.

My chin trembled.

“Me neither,” I whispered, wondering if it would be rude of me to fling myself into his arms for a third time.

We stared at each other in silence for a long moment, both of us breathing hard.

“I know you don’t have much time.” I gestured at the abandoned water drum. “I’ll follow you at a distance. Once we reach Mary’s place, we’ll think of a plan. I’ll stay hidden.”

Gloam bent his head to scribble frantically.

It’s not safe. I won’t be able to protect you.

“I’m not leaving you, Gloam.” My voice was uncharacteristically sharp. “I’m going to find a way to get you free.”

You might get hurt. You should go back to your camp.

I snorted weakly. “We’re weeks away from the camp now. It’s just as dangerous for me to head back there on my own.”

That stumped him. He faltered, hand and pencil poised over the page.

I gave him a big, watery grin.

“You’re stuck with me now.”

Gloam stilled, then let out a fragile, amused sound, like he was scared to tempt fate by showing even a hint of happiness.

He’d been so sad, my big monster. And he wouldn’t have me with him anymore, walking beside him each day, distracting him with my endless chatter. He’d be back out there alone again, while I skulked along behind them trying to remain undetected.

I wanted to give him a moment of happiness before he had to leave again, and my stomach lurched with anticipation at the idea that popped into my head.

“Stand up,” I rasped, shoving the notebook back in my duffle and rising to my feet after him. Tangling my fingers in his, I led him over to a tree. He let me turn him until his back was against the thick trunk.

Then I dropped back to my knees.

Gloam went completely still, and I glanced up to see his caged head turn toward the drum a short distance away by the edge of the river, then back to me.

“I know you have to go,” I told him, knowing the compulsion to obey would be riding him. “But I want to give you something before you do.”

I looked at the thick, already growing bulge in the front of his pants to make my intention unmistakably clear. Gloam rumbled out a desperate sound from above, one trembling hand reaching down to curve briefly around my cheek. The chain wound around his thick forearm clinked with the movement.

I turned my head and kissed his palm, then glanced over my shoulder nervously. I didn’t think Mary would come traipsing through the woods to look for him, but she might have sent her horrible little pet in to find Gloam if he took too long. I didn’t want to consider what it might do to me if it found me out here.

Of all the stupid things I’d ever done in my life, this had to top the list, but I couldn’t bring myself to stop as I stripped off my gloves and fumbled with the lacing on the front of Gloam’s pants. As soon as it was loose, I tugged on the tight leather until his cock popped free, almost smacking me in the face.

Oh, fuck. My gut tightened with want, stiff dick straining in my pants, as my fingers circled that thick mid-shaft swell as though magnetised. It was pulsing softly already and when I squeezed, Gloam’s chest inflated with a huge, shaky breath above me.

With my other hand, I gave his big balls a reverent stroke, then tugged lightly on the sac so I could watch them slowly lift back up, closer to his

body, when I let go. Gloam shuddered, hands reaching to cup the back of my head tenderly.

He went completely still as I leaned in, and a low rumble broke from his chest when I enclosed the weeping tip of his cock in a wet, sucking kiss.

We both shuddered with pleasure. I hadn't had my mouth around a cock for so long, but all those other times, when I'd hastily done this in a shadowed corner of the camp with a passing trader or nomad, paled in comparison in an instant. Apollo and I had messed around once, a few years back, but there was no driving urgency or passion behind it, so it hadn't happened again.

This, though… There was so much urgency inside me that I was overflowing with it, my hands shaking and chest too tight as I desperately tried to show Gloam how much he meant to me. How much I wanted him.

I licked around his head, pressing the tip of my tongue into the little divot until it gave up another small gush of pre-cum that I immediately lapped up with a moan. There was no way I'd be able to get my mouth over that fat bulge, so I settled for sucking on the head, slurping around it obscenely, as I jerked the rest of his cock with both hands.

Gloam's huge thighs shook, his cage letting out an audible *thunk* as it dropped back against the tree behind him. I wished I could savour this, but we didn't have much time. I wasn't sure how Gloam was resisting the compulsion to carry out Mary's order, but the drum was empty where it rested by the riverbank, so perhaps that allowed him some leeway.

In that moment, I didn't care. I sucked wetly, glancing up when I saw Gloam's cage tilt down toward me past the heaving expanse of his chest. I wished I could see his face. I dropped one hand from his shaft to cradle his balls, feeling them tighten against my palm. My own nuts lurched up to hug the tingling base of my dick in sympathy. I squeezed and tugged again as I sucked, wanting to make this as good for him as I could. As good as my limited experience would allow.

Gloam's trembling thighs eagerly widened as much as they could when I dropped my hand to trail a finger past the sensitive stretch behind his balls until I found his tight pucker. I moaned gutturally around his cock at the slickness that immediately coated my fingertip. His big body shook when I dipped my finger inside, before sliding it free to return with two.

Gloam's hitching moan curled around me, urging me to suck harder and squeeze that throbbing bulge as I fucked him with my fingers. His big

hands moved frantically through my hair, his chest pumping with his harsh panting breaths. As his hips twitched, his cock grew even harder in my mouth, leaking copiously. That fat mid-shaft bulge swelled even more, throbbing under my fingers.

The first gush of hot cum that flooded my mouth made my knees weak, and I was glad I was already on them. Gloam was shaking, his hands curling into my hair and gripping tight as his ass spasmed around my fingers and his thick cock jerked in my mouth with each heavy spurt. I swallowed everything he gave me hungrily, licking around the sensitive tip for more when it finally stopped shooting. Gloam moaned low in his chest as his hands gentled in my hair and slowly eased me away from his cock. He shuddered when I carried on sucking, dragging my mouth over the head.

He hurriedly tucked himself away with trembling fingers while I knelt there, dazed and so turned on I couldn't think straight. When he dropped to his knees before me and reached for my pants, my hands shot down to help him undo them, our fingers clashing in our haste.

Gloam cupped my tender nuts reverently with one hand, while the other gave my cock a long, slow stroke. My whole body jerked, hands shooting out to clutch at the straps over his shoulders, and I looked down between us so I could watch. My vision wavered at the sight of his long, grey fingers touching me so intimately.

"Fa-fast," I panted, my hips jerking into Gloam's soft touch. "We don't —please—"

He rumbled out a low sound and obeyed, tightening his hand and speeding up his pumping fist. My legs turned to jelly, thighs trembling as I panted out loud, heavy breaths. My hands scrabbled to touch every inch of him I could, sliding frantically around his shoulders, down his flexing arms, over his wide chest that was still rising quicker than normal.

"Oh fuck," I breathed, brows pinching at the sight of him stroking me off with his big hand. "Fuck—Gloam—"

I hunched over and came in a rush, the orgasm shooting out of me in fast spurts that painted Gloam's stomach. I tipped forward and panted into his shoulder, shuddering with sensitivity when he kept stroking and gently squeezing my balls, milking me dry until I went boneless.

Too soon, the realisation that Gloam had been gone a long time, and Mary was waiting, cut through the pleasant fog like a knife. I kissed his

shoulder before pulling away and crawling a few steps on weak knees until I could stretch out and reach my duffle.

“You have to go,” I said as I pulled out the rag and returned to wipe his stomach clean.

I put on my gloves, stood up on shaky legs and quickly tucked my junk back into my pants, then scrubbed roughly at my face and retrieved my duffle and mask.

“I’ll stick close, but not too close,” I told him as he rose unsteadily to his feet. “And I’ll come and meet you when you next go hunting or to get water.”

Gloam clearly didn’t want to leave, but his body was shaking now with a different kind of urge. He took a jarring, reluctant step toward the water drum, trying to fight it, and I knew he’d delayed the compulsion to follow Mary’s orders for too long.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be fine.”

I had no idea if that was true, but I said it anyway to make him feel better.

I darted forward to drop a kiss on his chest, then stood back and watched, shoving on my mask, as he took stilted steps toward the drum and picked it up. I didn’t move as he waded into the water to fill it, looking back at me every few seconds.

Fear at being alone out here churned in my belly when he heaved the drum up and slogged back through the river to its bank. But I didn’t say anything. He’d just worry even more than he already was.

“I’ll see you soon.” I whispered the words even though we were still alone.

I raised a hand in goodbye when he started dragging his feet away, back toward the RV through the trees, still looking at me over his shoulder.

Then he was gone.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I lasted about an hour after it got dark before I snuck from the forest to the RV.

It was risky as shit, but I knew Mary's routine like the back of my hand by this point. She was a creature of habit. Not once had she stepped foot outside her motorhome at night in the whole time I'd been with them. Besides, I knew we'd sit in our usual spot at the back of the vehicle, out of sight. I could army crawl under the RV if she came out. I just had to hope the shulc didn't come with her, because that thing would sniff me out in an instant.

Gloam had been still and tense since finishing his chores for Mary, scanning the darkness constantly as I watched from the trees. When he saw me emerge from the treeline and sneak my way over, he walked quickly toward me until his chain was stretched to its limit, as desperate for me as I was him.

We embraced when I reached him, Gloam's big arms wrapping around me while I buried my face in his chest. Without a word, I tangled my fingers in his and led us to our spot at the back of RV. He pulled me into his lap as soon as we sat down, smoothing my grown-out hair back from my face.

Mary had never overheard us before, but it felt dangerous to say even a few words out loud now that I was no longer supposed to be here. I unhooked the lantern from the strap of my duffle and switched it on as I set it beside us, glancing up fearfully at the narrow window above. I didn't know where Mary's bedroom was in there, but that window was always dark, and she'd never even hinted at knowing that we talked every night.

Besides, I could hear her snoring in there. Sleeping peacefully, warm with the false knowledge that she had delivered another unwilling 'coal' into her Almighty Herald's arms.

Gloam had already retrieved the notebook when I looked back down, and I peered at the words he'd written.

Are you alright?

I pulled my mask off so I could smile up at him and press a kiss to his rounded shoulder.

I’m fine.

We balanced the notebook on my knee so I could stay curled up in his lap as we wrote. I held it steady for Gloam while he scrawled more words.

What happened in there? After they took you away?

My lips pulled down when I thought of Samson. I hoped he was alright.

The one who took me away didn’t want to be there. His name was Samson. He helped me escape from the roof. I hope they haven’t hurt him.

Gloam rumbled softly and stroked my back with his free hand.

That was good of him. And he helped you of his own free will, Adam. I am sure he was aware of the risks.

He’d been born in there, I scribbled back. *Isn’t that awful? And he said they all have a mark or something that stops them from being able to leave. He said I would have been given it at my ceremony.*

Gloam was tense beneath me now, and he wrote more slowly as he replied.

Yes, I am sure the Herald does everything they can to stop anyone from leaving.

What is the Herald? I asked. *What kind of monster?*

A salyik, Gloam told me. *They are a repressed race, treated poorly by most. I imagine the Herald quickly realised they had a chance to gain power and adoration here that they never would in our world.*

I nodded, staring at his jagged handwriting and chewing on my lip as I considered asking the question that was clamouring for attention at the front of my brain.

Were those your brothers? I eventually wrote.

Gloam’s big body stiffened entirely, but he must have known the question was coming. I’d been there. I’d seen them. They were clearly aytorin, and he’d said he travelled here with his two brothers. That they were triplets.

Yes.

My breath caught. I glanced up at Gloam’s face, but of course I couldn’t see it beneath the cage. I wondered how seeing them had made him feel.

Have they been enslaved too? By the Herald?

His hand twitched around his pencil, and my heart sank. Was this going to be something he couldn’t answer?

Then he wrote, *No.*

I stared at the single word, trying to work out what that answer really meant.

So they're with them by choice? They chose to join the cult? I didn't see any other monsters in the congregation.

The congregation is human. My brothers are not part of the flock. They are the Herald's protectors.

What the fuck?

By choice? I asked again to make sure.

Yes.

So what happened?? How did you end up here with Mary?? Were you with the Herald by choice too??

I felt ill at the thought, but I had to ask. How else could Gloam have ended up enslaved by Mary while his brothers served her false prophet? It had to all connect. It was far too coincidental otherwise.

Gloam's hand spasmed hard as he tried to write. He stopped several times, a series of jagged, indecipherable slashes appearing on the page. Eventually, he managed to get something down.

They did this to me.

I choked on a breath, lifting my head to stare at him. My eyes took in the cage. Did he mean…

Your brothers put that cage on you?

Gloam's head jerked in a tiny nod, and my breath left me in a rush. His brothers had put that cage on his head. They had taken away his voice. His freedom.

Why would they do that?? I asked, my heart breaking for him. It was the worst kind of betrayal.

Once again, Gloam struggled to get anything down at first.

They serve the Herald willingly. I did not.

My heart was pounding in my throat. I was finally getting answers. We had found a way for Gloam to give me clues about what had happened to him, a way that circumvented the order I was pretty sure Mary had given him to protect her from all. Maybe that meant this wasn't going to point me directly to the key to freeing him, but it was something.

So the Herald and your brothers enslaved you first somehow. My hand was shaking with the urgent need to get it all written down, so I could think through it clearly in my head. *And then they gave you to Mary?*

I cannot answer, Gloam wrote, but his other hand squeezed my side tight for a brief moment.

That meant yes. That meant yes.

I think it's a spell or a curse, I scribbled urgently.

I'd felt silly considering it before, but I didn't care now. I knew Gloam wouldn't think I was stupid.

And the cage is to stop you breaking it. There's something you can say to break it. That's why they took away your voice.

Gloam was vibrating beneath me.

I cannot answer.

I wanted to cry and whoop in triumph at the same time.

I'm getting that fucking cage off your head, I wrote, pressing the pencil in hard with the force of my words.

Gloam shuddered and pulled me tighter to him, then started writing back.

We can talk more about them tomorrow, but for now I just want to be glad of the fact you are back here with me. That you're safe.

I melted, wriggling even closer to his big warm body, and nodded against his chest.

We sat in contented silence for a while, Gloam's hand smoothing over my back through my western jacket. He was right. We should enjoy the fact that we were both here, together. I still had time to think of a way to get the cage off before we reached Mary's place.

Wanting to make him smile, even if I wouldn't be able to see it, I picked up the notebook and quickly scribbled some words.

Can I suck you off again? I asked, balls tingling at the memory of it. I looked up to shoot him a lascivious grin.

A low rumble of amusement vibrated through Gloam's chest before he cut it short, glancing up at the dark window above us.

I don't think I will be able to stay quiet if you do that, my precious Adam, he wrote.

Then his head bent shyly.

I wish I could do the same for you.

My chest grew warm at his sweet words, even as my dick started plumping up in my pants at the idea of Gloam's big body between my thighs, his mysterious mouth sucking me in. I extracted the pencil from his fingers and uncurled my legs, drawing his hand between them to cover the

outline of my rapidly stiffening cock so he could feel just how much he affected me.

Beneath my ass, Gloam grew hard. He mapped the outline of my cock with long fingers, rubbing it with his palm through the fabric to create heated friction.

I let out a hard breath at the feel, grabbing the pencil before I got too distracted.

Tell you what, when I get that cage off you, we'll find somewhere to hide away for days, and you can suck my dick as much as you want. Deal?

I realised Gloam would have to remove his hand to answer me, and I cursed myself for saying anything at all. He gave my dick a final squeeze before letting go to write his reply.

It is a deal.

I slipped away just before dawn, and over the next several days we fell into our new pattern. I would trail out of sight behind them every day, reuniting briefly with Gloam when he went to hunt for Mary's dinner or to collect water.

Once it was dark and Mary was definitely in for the night, I would sneak my way to the RV and we would sit in our spot together, with me always curled up on Gloam's lap now. We would talk, or just sit entwined in silence, or—once or twice, when we couldn't get ourselves under control in time—make each other come.

The first time, we had jerked each other off with feverish, desperate hands. The second, I'd climbed into Gloam's lap, straddling his thick thighs, and he had stroked us off together, both our cocks enclosed in his big fist. He made me pick a signal that I could use without speaking if I wanted to stop, seeing as it was too dangerous to talk at all now. His signal was still tugging on my earlobe. I told him I'd squeeze his hand if he did anything I didn't like—not that I thought there'd be a single thing he would do to me that I wouldn't like.

I wondered if we'd ever get a chance to do more. Not that it wasn't amazing, but I dreamed of being able to stretch out, completely naked, in a big soft bed with Gloam, his head free of the cage and his mouth able to kiss me wherever he wanted.

Somehow, I avoided any beastie attacks. A few hesitantly approached the RV, curious, but none of them seemed to be dangerous because Gloam just watched them passively, his war hammer still resting on the ground.

One of the days, Mary let her shulc out to hunt for its dinner, and my chest had spasmed with fear when I saw it skittering across the ground in my direction. I'd managed to scramble up a tree in seconds, fear driving me to move faster than I ever had before. I sat perched up there, perfectly still as the burgundy creature passed directly beneath me. It hadn't seen me—too busy snuffling through the fallen leaves, trying to find a small animal to eat.

Gloam still caught my dinner for me when he hunted for Mary. He would roast it over a small fire before it got dark, and I'd tear hungrily into the cold, cooked meat when I came to him for the night. For once, I was grateful for Mary's cruel indifference to him, because she never even noticed that a being who didn't eat was roasting meat outside her RV every evening.

I told him repeatedly that he didn't have to do it. That I could fend for myself—even though I'd be shit at it—but he'd written in our book that he liked providing for me. That it soothed something in him. I'd turned to goo at that and rained kisses all over his chest until he'd tugged me back with a low, amused rumble.

The air was getting warmer again as we made our way further west, but it didn't matter, I was still sleeping in Gloam's arms every night. He would wake me as the sky started to lighten, and I would blearily savour my last few minutes with him before I had to leave again to trail behind them.

It had only been a couple of hours since I'd left Gloam to sneak behind them that morning when the mansion came into view on the horizon. A tall wall surrounded it, but the property was so large that I could still take in the faded grey roof and white walls with large, gleaming windows.

It loomed closer as Gloam and the RV headed right for it. This was Mary's place.

When we were close enough that I had to tilt my head back to look at it, I realised Gloam was directing the borolesh toward a big double gate at the front that would have been elegant were it not for the huge chain wrapped around its thick bars, secured with a heavy padlock similar to the one tethering Gloam to the RV.

When they stopped in front of it, I darted behind a tree and watched Mary emerge from the RV and step forward to unlock the gate. She was beaming, chattering to her creepy pet, clearly glad to be *home*.

Once the chain had slithered to the ground, she turned and waltzed back into the RV, barking something at Gloam that I couldn't hear. He slowly stepped forward and gathered the chain and padlock, then pushed open the heavy gates as he clicked at the borolesh to get them moving.

Before they vanished through the gates, I saw him turn his caged head back, trying to find me. I didn't dare move from my spot, and I watched in dismay as he pushed those heavy gates shut behind him.

Fuck. How was I going to get in?

I crept closer, heart in my throat. As I approached the wall, I stared at the sprawling mansion beyond it, wondering where Mary kept her monster collection in there.

Slinking along the perimeter, I spotted a big tree up ahead with thick branches that almost reached the top of the wall. My stomach lurched with nervous anticipation. I'd climbed that tree the other day when the shulc got close. I could do this.

I was so focused on reaching the tree and getting over that wall that I didn't feel my foot sink into softness until it was too late. Feeling the tug on my boot, I looked down with a frown—and froze.

It looked almost like a small termite nest, but it was soft. My foot had sunk right into the centre of it.

As I stared down, long, wriggling legs emerged from the loose dirt.

I threw myself back, boot rising from the mound in a small shower of earth, and a torrent of legs followed. Dozens of creatures began pouring from a hole that had emerged, and for a terrifying moment I thought I was seeing a pile of disembodied hands rise from the ground.

They *looked* like fucking hands. Like reddish-brown human hands with too many knuckles and too-thin fingers. Ten of them, five on either side. I was frozen, gaping in horror, my mind trying to process what I was seeing. I couldn't make out anything that looked like a face or a head, just a flat, fleshy body with long bony fingers spread around it.

One jumped a short distance through the air and landed on my boot.

I wasn't sure how I held back my horrified scream as I jerked my foot wildly to fling it off. It clung on for long, determined seconds before slipping back to the ground.

I ran.

I headed straight for the tree, scrambling up its trunk so fast it felt like I flew up there. The hand creatures skittered around its base. One took a running jump to try and reach me.

Nope, fuck that. *Fuck. That.* With agility I never knew I possessed, I scrambled along a thick branch and threw myself at the wall, barely even feeling the impact when I tumbled right over and landed hard on my ass on the other side.

I lay there for a few seconds, staring up at the blue sky and gasping for breath with the wind momentarily knocked out of me. No hand creatures followed me over, and eventually my heart-rate decreased enough for me to shakily sit up.

It was totally still and quiet in here except for the gentle rustle of the trees dotted around the property. I was close enough to the front of the mansion to see Mary's RV parked on a wide, circular drive, but Gloam was gone, and the borolesh had been unchained. I could see them lumbering slowly toward a copse of tall trees tucked into the corner of the walled-off estate.

I had to move. I was totally exposed here. Easing myself up and ignoring the ache in my tailbone, I crept away from the front of the mansion toward the side of the building. It took me a while. I moved cautiously, and this place was huge.

When I finally made it, breathing a little easier once I was away from the house's front windows, I spotted another building set further back and to the side of the main house. It looked like a barn, but like it had once been a fake, shiny version of a barn—one that hadn't been built to actually house animals.

It was probably the safest spot for me to hide while I figured out what to do. There was no way Mary went in there, not when she had all that huge house to herself. Maybe this was where the borolesh were kept when she wasn't on the road, but if that was the case, Gloam would be the one who moved them inside. I'd be able to talk to him. Maybe this was where *Gloam* lived when they weren't on the road. I doubted she let him stay anywhere remotely comfortable.

I could see an open window on the ground level of the barn, and I cast a fearful look at the big house as I started making my way over. I felt like a

cartoon spy. Like I was taking giant, exaggerated, creeping footsteps to remain undetected. I was *so* glad Lilac or Ghost couldn't see me right now.

My heart was pounding when I reached the window, and I slowly pried it open until I could hoist myself up and through.

It was cool and dim inside and smelled weird. Like chemicals mixed with something else, something more earthy and natural. I dropped as silently as I could to the ground and remained crouching for a few seconds until I was sure no one was in here.

Straightening up, I turned and blinked as my eyes adjusted to the shafts of sunlight streaming in through the windows on the upper level of the barn. When a whisper of sound close to my left reached me, I froze.

I blinked quickly to speed up my adjusting vision, and when I realised what was in here—what I was looking at—I slammed myself back against the windowsill with a choked gasp, gripping the edge tight.

I'd found Mary's monster collection.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

Twenty cages. Fourteen occupied.

I was in a room with fourteen monsters.

Not even the fact that they were all stuck behind bars could lessen the fear that froze me in place for long moments. Now that I knew they were here, their presence pressed heavily on my chest, quickening my breaths and stopping me from moving an inch.

They were modern-looking cages, more like cells, with thick metal frames holding clear glass panels in place. I knew these had to have come from the military. These were probably similar to what they'd used to hold beasties back at the Nebraska base, before it had all gone wrong.

My breath caught with fear. We still didn't know exactly what had happened at the base—well, maybe Aury had told Ghost more—but we knew the beasties had gotten free and escaped.

Were these cages really strong enough to hold them?

None of the monsters were trying to escape, though, or even making any noise. The one closest to my left was watching me with big, mournful eyes in an electrifying shade of teal. In fact, its whole body was the same brilliant shade. Sinewy, with long, slender limbs ending in three-fingered hands. It sat crouched on its haunches in the cell, its entire body bare but only a smooth mound between its spread legs. Its chest was flat, torso slim. It had a tiny button nose and a small mouth which was pulled down as it watched me.

It didn't look dangerous. It just looked broken. And sad.

I let out a shuddering breath and slowly let go of the window ledge, taking a tentative step deeper into the barn. I wanted to save these beasties. I had to try and calm down. They were behind bars and glass. They couldn't get me. Not that any of them seemed to even want to. All of them were quiet, and only some were watching me.

The barn was long and wide, the monster cages set back along the edges against the walls. In the middle of the space was another cell—an empty one. It was much, much bigger than the others, with clear glass all the way around and on its top, as though whatever went inside it needed to be visible from above.

I looked up and noticed that the upper half-floor of the barn had been sumptuously decorated. Thick glass had been erected along the low railing, diffusing the light that came in through the windows, which was what had caused my eyes to struggle to adjust for long moments. Behind it, I could see heavy, deep red drapes covering the plain wooden walls, and rows of comfortable-looking armchairs set up—all facing the space below.

I realised what it was.

That was a *viewing platform.* This cage was a ring of some kind—a pit. This was where Mary made the monsters fight. For entertainment.

If Mary *hadn't* planned on taking me to the Herald, would she have instead thrown me in that big glass cage with one of her beasties and invited her rich friends to watch what happened?

I stepped deeper into the room, skirting around the edge of the big cage. My boots on the wooden floor were the only sound in here, aside from quiet shuffles from a few of the monsters as they turned to keep watching me.

Each one was different and beautiful in their own way. Mary had clearly spent time curating only the most *fascinating* looking monsters for her collection.

One had shimmering scales in iridescent colours, its airtight cage half-filled with water. They all had small vents at the top to let in oxygen, I realised as I looked around, but all the cages were empty except for the monsters within them. No bedding. No food or water bowls.

Another beastie was covered in a kaleidoscope of feathers that somehow looked leathery and stiff, but it didn't resemble any kind of bird I'd ever seen. It looked more prehistoric, with its heavy, protruding brow over big black eyes that watched me keenly. Its beaked mouth was the width of its entire face.

There was a beastie that crowded its cage entirely with its long, thick arms—six of them. Its body was round and blank, and it looked like a monstrous version of those thin, wispy spiders that were everywhere in the camp when summer was coming to an end. That one scared me. I looked away from it quickly.

One of them had a body like a big cat, and its leathery skin was blindingly white with beautiful lavender stripes. It bared its teeth at me, letting out a low, vibrating growl as I walked past its cage.

I tentatively stepped closer to one of the cells—one with a fairly docile-looking beastie inside, with sad orange eyes and a long tail trailing limply

behind its squat body. I glanced at it warily before trying to spot a lock or some way to get the cage open. Not that I planned on doing it right that second, but I wasn't going to leave these beasties here after I'd freed Gloam. I couldn't.

Mary had wanted to put Aury in one of these cages. Sweet, gentle Aury who I was pretty sure Ghost had already been in love with when they left for the Topeka camp.

Rage made me go hot all over, my hands clenching into shaking fists. I wanted to free them all *now,* but I didn't dare—not without Gloam. Most of these beasties looked placid. Some looked weak. All of them were broken-spirited. But I had no idea if they'd lash out at the first person they came into contact with after years of abuse and captivity, even if that person was freeing them.

Besides, there was no way I could open these cages. I could already tell. And if—when—I *did* find something that could, I was getting Gloam's cage off before anything else.

A sound from outside made my heart spasm with terror. I cast a wild glance around, trying to find somewhere to hide. I was all the way on the other side of the long room, as far from the window I'd come in through as I could get. I wouldn't have time to make it back there and out.

Spotting a closed door to my right, I ran for it. It was heavy as shit, and I only just managed to slip through the gap I made and into the dark room before I heard those big double doors being unlocked. I eased the door over until it was almost closed, with just a tiny sliver I could listen through.

"Ahhh, here they are." Mary's jovial voice made my lip curl in disgust. "Hello, my pets! Did you miss me?"

None of them made any noise, but I didn't think Mary was looking for an answer anyway. I wondered if any of these beasties were the same level of intelligence as Gloam or Aury. If they *could* speak, but didn't dare in their captor's presence.

I went still, realising Gloam was with her when she spoke again.

"Is that—You left a window open, you stupid oaf! Anything could have gotten in here while we were gone! *Go and shut it.*"

My teeth clenched together behind my mask as fury boiled my blood. I hated her. I hated her with a gut-churning passion that I had never felt toward anyone before. Gloam was the smartest person I'd ever met. Smarter than she could ever fucking be. He wasn't stupid. He wasn't an oaf.

Part of me hoped that when we set her monsters free, one of them ripped her to shreds.

I could hear Gloam's heavy boots crossing the wooden floor, and the drag of his war hammer, before the swish and click of the window shutting drifted over. I wondered if he knew I'd gotten in here through it. If he could somehow sense me nearby.

"I suppose they must be hungry."

Mary sounded entirely uninterested in that aspect of her imprisoned monsters' upkeep. God, she'd been gone *weeks*. Had they sat here starving that whole time?

"Tend to them, and then go to the west wing and stay there until I call for you. Major Bratton will be arriving soon. Make sure you remain out of sight."

My brows furrowed. Why did she want Gloam to stay hidden while the military was here? Wouldn't she want him *protecting* her? Although if she was working with them, I supposed she didn't see them as a threat. They had a mutually beneficial partnership, after all.

"*Such* a shame I couldn't get the rycke," Mary was saying in the main room of the barn as I stayed pressed against the door. "But then it did have those hideous scars on its face. And the damaged wing. It wouldn't have fit in with the rest of the collection. Bratton is expecting it to be here, though. I'll have to tell him something."

Was she telling Gloam all this? It surprised me that she was speaking to him almost like an equal. But then I supposed she had no one else. And he was forced to listen.

I jumped and barely managed to suppress my gasp when a whisper of sound came from behind me in the room. I'd been focusing so hard on listening to Mary that I hadn't even turned around to scope it out. Heart giving a mighty thud, I slowly turned my head to look over my shoulder.

My gaze met dozens of clustered eyes, blinking back at me sporadically from a shadowed corner of the room.

I had no idea how I managed to stay silent as I plastered myself against the wall beside the door, my body breaking out in petrified goosebumps. There was a window in here, but the thick bough of a huge tree outside stopped most of the light getting in.

As my vision adjusted, I could just make out the shape of the creature those eyes were attached to. It looked tall and rangy, long limbs curled up

as it sat in its cage, which was different from the others—this one had thick bars going all the way across it in front of the glass. Like it needed extra reinforcement.

Black and white eyes—all different sizes, all blinking discordantly—ringed the top half of the monster's head. Beneath them sat a wide mouth crowded with sharp, jutting teeth. There was no room for a nose. Its mouth was too big, and it had far too many eyes.

It was staring at me, those eyes swivelling as it took me in from head to toe. Slowly, it uncurled those long limbs and crept closer, out of the corner of its cage.

My breaths shuddered out of me as I stared back. I watched it raise a long, thin hand with too-long fingers—too many knuckles—to the glass wall of its cell. Its skin was dark with a faint texture, and I stared at the lines in the monster's palm, pressed flat against the glass, as it stared back at me.

Then it smashed that hand into the glass and started screaming.

I jumped out of my skin, vision whiting with terror for a moment as the monster bellowed out a bloodthirsty, murderous roar and started smashing its body into the glass, frantic to get to me. Its mouth gaped wide, showing me its endless needle teeth. Its long body shuddered with its desperate desire to get out of its cage and tear me apart.

"What is wrong with it?" I heard Mary shriek from the room behind me, and panic made my vision go spotty. "Go and see what it's doing!"

Fuck fuck *fuck*. I didn't want to take my eyes off the monster, but I had to. I stumbled for the window and wrenched it open, having no time to worry about how loud I was being. I doubted anything could be heard over the furious screaming of the creature in the cage anyway.

As I clambered out and dropped to the grass below with a pained thud, I thought I heard the glass cracking on its cell.

Mary's voice got louder as the door in the room swung open. I quickly huddled under the window, trying to slow my pounding heart and calm my breaths so they didn't give me away.

"What is *wrong* with it?" she repeated in a shrill, irritated tone. "*Shut up*, you disgusting beast!"

It didn't shut up, no doubt getting even more excited at the sight of its sadistic captor—at the idea of ripping her apart with its teeth and too-long fingers.

Mary ignored it, and I heard her tut in irritation.

"*Another* window left open, you stupid idiot! No wonder it's going mad. It probably heard something outside. I cannot trust you to do a *single thing right* unless I order it, can I? You're *useless*. Go and shut the damn window and get out of my sight."

Her voice dripped with acid, and if Gloam hadn't been stuck in that room with her, I would have wished for that beastie to break free from its cage and tear out her throat.

The weight of a presence above me made me go completely still, until I slowly looked up and saw Gloam above me at the open window. He stared back down at me through his cage for a second, before slowly closing the window and muffling the caged monster's roars.

I needed to get away before they came back out of the barn. The west wing. Mary had told Gloam to go and stay out of sight in the west wing of the mansion. I just hoped she'd ordered it because it was the part of the house that she didn't occupy—that it was where she made him go when she had no use for him.

I crept along the edge of the barn, staying crouched low to avoid being seen through any windows. My heart raced as I sprinted toward the house, part of me sure Mary would burst out of the barn's front doors and scream at Gloam to kill me.

Fuck, which side was the west wing? Was it when you were facing the house or facing away from it? I had no idea. I'd never even seen a house this large before. I went with my gut and raced to the far end of the mansion, furthest away from the barn, figuring Mary would stay close to her collection to keep an eye on them.

As I passed windows, I could see sumptuously decorated rooms and huge spaces that gleamed, not a speck of dust or dirt in sight. Did she make Gloam clean her house? Was that another task she ordered him to do just to watch him bend to her will?

I exhaled in relief when I reached the far end of the mansion and peered through a window that was slightly ajar, seeing that this part of the house looked far less opulent. It was dusty, the windows smeared and smudged and the furniture inside far simpler and more worn out. There was no way Mary lived in here.

I scrambled through the window and resisted the urge to cough when my boots kicked up a swirl of dust. Now I just had to find somewhere to wait, where I wouldn't be seen if Mary *did* come into this part of the house.

Somewhere to hide until I heard Gloam get here and could be sure he was alone.

I wondered if there was a particular room he occupied when she made him hide away here. I still didn't know why she made him stay out of sight when the military visited. Was it because he was a being who could be controlled? I'd had my suspicions that that was why the military captured monsters. That they wanted to try and control them for their own gain.

I dreaded to think what they would make Gloam do if they got hold of him. They would turn him into an unstoppable killing machine.

I made my way quietly out of the room into a long, narrow corridor lit brightly by the wide window at the end. I didn't feel particularly safe down here, where Mary could easily peer in and spot me if she happened to take a stroll around her estate with her creepy little pet shulc in tow. At the other end of the hallway was a staircase, so I made my way up it, wincing as the steps creaked under my boots.

This floor looked a little cleaner and more well-kept. I wondered if Gloam looked after it because he tended to occupy this area when he wasn't being forced to roam the Wastes with Mary, hunting for new beasties to capture.

Opening the first door, I stepped into a bright, decent-sized bedroom with a large bed and a small, old-fashioned desk tucked into the corner beneath a window with clean panes. The bed didn't look slept in, the sheets worn and dusty, but I could just somehow *tell* Gloam had at least been in here at some point.

There was a stack of books on the desk, and a wide leather armchair had been pulled in front of it, the original flimsy wooden desk chair moved to one side. I could just picture Gloam sitting there reading or writing, maybe finding a miniscule slice of peace until Mary barked at him to do her bidding. The thought made me smile just a little—the first in days and days, it felt like.

Looking around, I spotted panelled closet doors to my right and headed toward them. I didn't think Mary would come to this part of the house, but better to be safe than sorry. Pulling the doors open, I found some clothes still hung up inside. A neat row of pressed maid's uniforms, still crisp and unblemished. There were a few pairs of small, heeled black pumps tucked beneath.

Exhaling, I tugged off my mask and stuffed it in my duffle before I ducked inside and pulled the doors shut behind me.

Then I curled up on the floor of the closet, my arms wrapped tight around my knees, and waited for my beastie to find me.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

It wasn't long before I heard heavy footsteps echoing up the staircase outside the room. I would've recognised Gloam's stride anywhere, but I didn't move yet, just in case Mary was still with him.

He walked slowly, no doubt wondering where I was. I heard him pause outside the bedroom door. I couldn't remember if I'd shut it behind me or not—god, I really was terrible at being a sneak. If I hadn't, at least I'd inadvertently left him a clue to my whereabouts.

Holding my breath, I leaned forward and peered through the slats of the closet door. Gloam stepped inside and slowly closed the door behind him, leaning his war hammer against the wall. He stood still, as though waiting, or trying to sense if I was in here. His chain was still wound around his thick forearm, cumbersome as ever.

I couldn't wait any longer, and I couldn't hear any sounds at all coming from outside the bedroom. He was alone.

I scrambled up and out of the closet, launching myself at Gloam as he turned sharply toward me. He caught me in his arms, holding me close when I wrapped my legs around his waist and buried my face in the bend of his neck.

"Are you okay?" I whispered. "Did the—did that monster escape and hurt you?"

It was probably an irrational fear, but I could have sworn I heard the glass cracking on its cage.

Gloam tightened his arms around me, the chain digging into my skin through my jacket and the edge of his cage brushing my hair when he shook his head. He raised one hand to cup the back of my head when I finally lifted it to look up at him, wishing now more than ever that I could see his face.

"We're so close, Gloam," I whispered. "I'm going to find something in this stupid fucking house. I'm going to get that cage off you and then—and then we can…"

I wanted him to stay with me. I didn't think I'd be able to stand being apart from him now, after everything we'd gone through together. It had been me and Gloam against the world for weeks. He was my partner in

crime. He was my… my friend, but more than that. Not just a friend. What I felt for him far surpassed that.

Realising he couldn't answer me, I reluctantly dropped to my feet and returned to the closet to grab my duffle. Gloam sat on the edge of the bed and reached for me, but before he could pull me into his lap I heard the crunch of tyres driving over gravel.

My heart jumped into my throat. Gloam stood up and walked to the window, so I followed him and clung to his thick arm.

"The military?" I whispered as we watched two dark green trucks pull into the circular drive and stop.

As Mary hurried out of the barn and toward them, a tall older man with a severe haircut, dressed in full military dress uniform, stepped out of the front car and brushed invisible lint off his lapels.

Gloam nodded, silently watching. More people got out of the cars—three more in stiff dress uniforms and several soldiers in fatigues carrying deadly rifles. As one, we backed away from the window.

After sitting back down on the end of the bed, Gloam pulled me into his lap as I hurriedly fumbled to open our notebook to the half-filled page.

Do we have to be really quiet? I asked. *Will they hear us in here?*

Gloam shook his head, taking the pencil.

They will go to the barn. They won't be able to hear us.

I exhaled. "I heard Mary telling you to stay hidden. Was it… Is it because the military would try and take you if they knew you could be controlled?"

He gave me a stiff nod.

She always makes me hide when they are here.

Fucking asshole. As if she couldn't get any worse, making Gloam hide away from her guests like a shameful secret, even though he probably appreciated the break from her vile presence.

How long will she be busy? I asked. Would we get some time alone together before she started barking orders at him again?

They will be in there a while. She doesn't like letting anyone into the house. They always conduct their business in the barn. There is a small, separate guest house that the military stay in when they visit, but they rarely stay long enough to use it.

How often do they visit?

Gloam gave a little shrug. *Fairly often. Mary has many visitors from the cities who come to view her collection. The military escorts them here.*

Do you have to stay out of sight then too?

Another nod.

Mary doesn't come to this part of the house, he wrote. *She has a bell that she uses to summon me from her wing. I go when she rings it so that she doesn't come looking for me here.* His shoulders hunched. *Do you judge me for that?*

"God, no," I breathed out loud, leaning in to kiss his shoulder. "I get it. You should be allowed at least one private space that isn't tainted by her evil presence."

I looked around again. The room was fairly clean and airy—and potentially safe. I wondered if I could stay in here while I figured out how to free Gloam. The thought of climbing into that big bed, even with the dusty sheets, made me want to cry. Especially if I got to do it with him.

"So… she doesn't come here? Ever?" I asked Gloam, my eyes briefly slipping shut when he held me tighter and stroked his big thumb over the pulse point in my neck.

He wrote with his other hand.

No. We are safe here. I will make sure you stay safe.

"I know you will," I croaked, turning my head to nuzzle his big, warm chest.

Gloam heaved a breath and smoothed his hand down my back in long, sweeping strokes that made my eyelids droop. I forced them back open when I realised he had written more.

You are tired, my precious Adam. Let me look after you. Please.

I shook my head and took the pencil. Even though I could speak out loud, it almost didn't feel fair to when Gloam couldn't.

I need to look around to find something while she's distracted. There must be something in this giant fucking house I can use to get that cage off.

They will be here a while, they always are, Gloam told me, his long fingers twining through my hair as he wrote. *We have time. First, you need to rest and eat.*

I'll rest and eat after the cage is off, I wrote back stubbornly.

Gloam rumbled out a frustrated sound.

No. You will rest and eat first. Wouldn't you like a nice hot shower?

Goddamnit. I raised my head and glared at him.

“Of course I’d like a nice hot shower. I’d give both my testicles for a nice hot shower. You’re such a sneaky bastard.”

Gloam let out an amused rumble.

Go and take a shower while I get you some food.

I sagged, my resolve crumbling in seconds. I *was* exhausted. And filthy.

“Alright,” I relented. “A quick shower. Then I look for tools. This place has to have a garage or a tool shed, right?”

Gloam cupped my cheek briefly in his big hand before standing up, gently setting me on my feet. He pointed at a closed door on the other side of the room, then turned to leave.

I wasn’t sure I believed him about the *hot* part of that shower, but I got up and opened the door he’d indicated, finding an old but intact bathroom inside, with marble counters and a big, glass-walled freestanding shower.

Nerves tightening my chest, I dropped my bag and leaned into the shower to turn it on. I was convinced Mary or the military were going to come sprinting into the room, guns already raised to shoot me—the strange raider creeping around her house.

Would she even recognise me if she saw me? Had she bothered to really look at me in the whole time I was with her? I suspected that the moment they left the Herald’s cult she had forgotten all about me, as unimportant as I was. And if I’d been forced to stay there, I would have ended up a masked, mindless cult member like all the others, and she never would have seen my face again even when she went to visit.

After just a few seconds, I could feel the air getting warmer as the water heated. Mary *did* have hot water here. I didn’t know why I was surprised. She was in cahoots with the military. She obviously had all the luxuries available in this place, even if it was out in the Wastes.

The lure of a hot shower pushed me to hurriedly strip down and step inside the cubicle. I couldn’t hold back my quiet groan as hot water pummelled down on my head, softening all my limbs. I sagged against the cold marble wall for a minute, tilting my face until all I could feel and hear and taste was the relentless pounding of the hard shower.

Eventually I forced myself to move to actually wash up. There was an old bottle of stale-smelling, rose-scented body wash on a recessed shelf, so I used it to scrub every inch of me before washing my tangled, growing out hair. I wondered if there were any scissors around that I could use to cut it.

I shivered in the cool air when I climbed out of the shower, tiptoeing naked to a tall cupboard tucked in the corner to stop myself slipping over on the smooth tiles. Inside was a neat stack of towels, and I grabbed the top one to hurriedly dry off so I could get dressed and back to Gloam.

Pulling on my pants, I carried the rest of my stuff back into the bedroom where Gloam was already waiting. A glass of water sat on the desk beside a bowl of nuts and a green apple.

“Thank you,” I said gratefully as I dumped my stuff on the floor.

My stomach rumbled when I picked up the apple and bit into it, wincing as its sharp tang flooded my tongue.

“This is so weird,” I said in a hushed voice around my mouthful, even though Gloam had said they wouldn’t hear us. “That Mary has no idea I’m here and I’m hiding in her freaking house.”

It was also kind of surreal to be truly alone with Gloam, in a private, enclosed space with—hopefully—no risk of anyone barging in.

The thought made my stomach tighten with an exhilarating rush of anticipation.

I was suddenly very aware that I was dressed only in my pants. Gloam had already seen me naked several times when he’d kept an eye out while I washed in a lake or river out in the Wastes. But he’d always been respectful, even though a few times I’d definitely felt his heavy gaze linger on my bare ass when I’d leaned down to retrieve my clothes after getting out of the water.

I couldn’t stop my eyes crawling over his huge, muscular torso as I finished my apple. His chest was so big and defined, and I felt a little ashamed of how hot I found that leather harness looping over his wide, bulging shoulders.

He tapered beautifully down to his hard stomach and lean hips. I was dying to run my tongue down every one of those grooves between his chiselled abs, over the deep valleys that pointed like an arrow to the thick bulge in his leather pants.

His thighs were huge, and I’d felt the rock-solid strength in them when they’d pressed up against my hips that first time we’d touched. When they had tensed beneath my hands while I’d sucked his cock in the forest.

I realised my breaths had become quick and raspy as I set the apple core down on the desk with slightly trembling fingers. Lust made my skin grow

hot, my cock already half-hard in my pants just from looking at his gorgeous, towering body.

Gloam was totally still, watching me from under his cage. But his already impossibly thick cock had filled out even more in his pants. They were so tight I could clearly see the outline of it—of that growing swell—and my breath caught when I remembered how he had felt in my mouth. How he had tasted.

Chest rising faster than normal, I took a halting step closer to him. Then another. Until I was lifting my shaking arms and curling my fingers under the straps of his harness.

“Gloam,” I croaked breathlessly, and from the corner of my eye I saw his dick surge in his pants.

He rumbled out a low sound and smoothed his big hands down the sides of my neck. Long fingers trailed down my chest, mapping my body, making me shiver as my dick strained to bust out of my pants.

“F-fuck.” I stared up at his cage, desperation tingeing my voice. “I want you so much.”

Gloam was breathing hard beneath his cage, his long fingers running up and down my chest in an almost frantic touch. He slid one hand up and over my neck to stroke my earlobe with his thumb, making me shiver. When he tugged gently on my ear, I knew what he was telling me.

“Our signals.” I nodded, a little frantic, just wanting to get on with it.

When he didn’t move, I knew he was waiting for me to say it out loud, and I barely suppressed my impatient huff.

“If I want you to stop, I’ll say stop or squeeze your hand. I promise.”

At that, he surged forward, pushing me back onto the bed. The moment I was flat on my back, he tore open my pants and yanked them and my underwear down together.

“Holy shit.”

My dick surged, springing up out of my pants to smack my abdomen as he tugged them off over my feet. The moment I was naked, I scrambled further up the bed so he’d have room between my legs.

I couldn’t help it—my hand shot down to grab my stiff cock when Gloam straightened up and his long fingers went to the ties of his pants. I shuddered with pleasure as I stroked my dick, watching avidly while Gloam loosened his pants and shoved them down his long legs in hurried movements.

I heard the thud of his boots hitting the floor, the rustle of fabric, and then he was placing a knee on the bed and climbing over me until he straddled my hips, completely naked except for the cage, that harness over his shoulders and the chain winding around his forearm.

A tiny part of me wanted to ask him to put the boots back on, but… maybe another time.

I immediately let go of my own dick to grab his.

“Fuck,” I rasped, staring at my tanned fingers wrapped around the thick, grey, cabled length of him.

I slid my fist from base to tip, feeling every one of those bumps and the impossibly thick bulge midway down the shaft.

Gloam rumbled out a deep sound of pleasure as his hips jerked. I could feel him staring down at me from within his cage. His fingers roamed over my chest, teasing my nipples until they ached. When pre-cum spilled from the tip of his cock, my mouth watered.

“I don’t want to stop touching you to get our book, so I’ll just say now that I’m down for anything,” I croaked.

Maybe I was being too trusting, but… I didn’t think so. I trusted Gloam entirely, and I had no reason not to.

“You don’t need to ask, okay?” I told him, tearing my hungry gaze away from his cock to look at my rough estimation of where his eyes were beneath the cage. “If I don’t like something, I’ll use my signal.”

Gloam’s big, muscular body shuddered at my words, his fingers momentarily tightening on my left nipple making me gasp. It merely served to reinforce what I already knew I wanted.

“Yeah,” I rasped, tilting his cock and arching my hips so it rubbed against mine. Fuck, those thick ridges felt *incredible*. “Do whatever you want with me, Gloam.”

Something in him snapped. In hurried, frantic movements, he tore my hand away from his cock and clambered higher over me, until his thick thighs were straddling my waist. My heart gave a mighty lurch and started to pound. Did that—Was he going to—

“Oh fuck.”

My voice trembled out of me when he reached back behind himself to grab my cock and tilt it up.

My breath caught as the sensitive, leaking tip of my cock slid over his soft pucker, already slick. My fingers dug way too hard into his thick thighs

when he pressed back and sat on my cock in one smooth, sudden glide. I cried out, head arching back as my dick was swiftly enveloped in tight, slick, textured heat that throbbed and squeezed.

Gloam shuddered, rumbling out a low sound from his chest, thighs shaking beneath my hands. His immense weight pinned my hips to the bed, ensuring my dick was buried as deep as it could possibly go in his ass. His thick cock twitched, jutting straight out from his body over my stomach, drooling pre-cum into my navel.

I took a deep, shuddering breath, trying to calm myself enough that I didn't come straight away. I gentled my clawing grip on his thighs and smoothed my palms up to his hips and back down again.

"You feel so good."

My voice was hoarse with lust, deeper than normal, and I wished I could hear him speak back to me.

I had a split second to wonder, for the millionth time, what his voice sounded like, but then Gloam was lifting his hips and my cock was slowly sliding back out of him, and the friction from those cables inside him was so good that I was—

"Oh *shit*," I gritted out through clenched teeth as he sank back down on my aching dick. Then up again.

Suddenly, he wasn't moving slow and steady anymore. He was riding me with hard, increasingly fast movements, fucking himself on my cock like he'd needed this for decades. Centuries.

I could relate.

One huge hand was splayed out over my pounding heart, pinning my chest to the mattress while his ass slammed down into my hips over and over, hard enough that if every inch of my body wasn't sensitised for pleasure, it probably would have hurt, or at least made me wince.

But it didn't. My hips twitched, spring loaded and eager to jerk up into his hot body, but honestly, there was no way I would have been able to keep up with Gloam's frantic pace. I was just along for the ride and I had absolutely no problem with that. It was already the hottest fuck of my life.

Gloam's huge chest was heaving, and the constant clinking of the chain twined around his arm accompanied the slick, frantic sound of our joined bodies smacking together. Without slowing his hips' urgent movements, he smoothed his free hand over my head and down, until his thumb slid over

my cheekbone in a gentle caress, so at odds with the almost animalistic way he was fucking himself on my dick.

Something in my chest broke at the touch, and I could feel my brows pinching as I stared up at him. I turned my head to kiss his palm.

“Gloam,” I croaked, sliding my hands up to smooth over his hips.

He shuddered, caged head momentarily tipping back as he worked himself on my cock.

“I wish I could kiss you,” I told him, and heard his answering, sadness-tinged rumble.

Somehow, I could tell he was saying it back to me. That he wanted it just as much. It made me all the more determined to get that fucking cage off his head.

His ass squeezed around my dick, distracting me until I shuddered out a desperate moan.

“Fuck.”

I looked at his stiff cock, bouncing and smacking my abdomen with his hips’ forceful movements, then back at his cage, then back at his dick again, my mouth watering.

I started babbling.

“I’m gonna get the cage off you, then you can ride my dick again just like this while you kiss me. Yeah? You’re gonna kiss me the whole time. We won’t even come up for air. I’ll suck on your tongue while you fuck yourself on my cock.”

Gloam let out a desperate rumble, his hips jerking. His cock had drooled pre-cum all over my stomach, a thin thread of it still connected to his slit. I slid my fingers around and thumbed it off, then raised my hand to my mouth.

“You gonna suck me off when your mouth is free?” I asked, staring at his cage as I sucked his pre-cum off my thumb. Gloam’s hips stuttered again, ass tightening around my dick, making me tremble. “Do you want to taste my cock? My cum?”

His cage bobbed in a frantic nod.

“Mmm.”

I slid my hand back up his thigh. His big hand spasmed against my chest when I grasped his cock. His chest was heaving with his panting breaths, which sounded so loud and harsh as they echoed in his cage. My jaw clenched at how impossibly hard he was in my fist.

“Maybe I’ll make you suck me off before I bend you over the bed and fuck you. Would you like that?”

Gloam arched above me with a deep, garbled bellow and started to come —*hard*. His ass squeezed around my stiff cock so forcefully that it would have pushed me right out if he hadn’t been sitting on it with his immense weight. His cock throbbed in my fist, heavy jets of cum spurting from it all over my chest and stomach. I hadn’t even gotten the chance to jerk him off, but I squeezed my fist and slid it up, over all those ridges, past that throbbing swell, to thumb the slick, vulnerable tip as it shot out his release.

Gloam shuddered with sensitivity, still sliding jerkily up and down my cock to chase every last bit of pleasure. Seeing him so completely lost to it made my own orgasm boil up my shaft, my balls wrenching up tight and brushing against his ass. My eyes rolled back in my head.

I raised my hand from his cock to my mouth and sucked his cum off my fingers, which tipped me over the edge. I moaned out a loud grunt as I came, shuddering and shooting into Gloam’s hot, slick body. My shoulders curled up off the bed from the force of it, and I felt him smooth a big hand over the back of my head while I gasped with ecstasy.

“Oh my god,” I rasped as I finally started to come back down to earth, breathing hard, sweating and totally limp. My cock gave a final, weak pulse in Gloam’s ass before it started to soften.

My hands found his thighs again as I lay there trying to catch my breath. I smoothed them up and down in what I hoped was a soothing gesture, and felt his thick, firm thighs trembling under my touch.

“Are you okay?” I asked him, my voice nothing more than a fucked-out croak.

His cage dipped once in a nod as he slowly lifted his ass until my cock slid free, but he didn’t climb off me just yet. His big hands rested on my chest almost reverently, and I could feel him staring down at me, so I smiled tiredly.

“That was incredible,” I told him, still trailing my fingers up and down his thighs, gratified when he gave a little shiver from the feel.

Gloam’s hands were achingly gentle when they slid up to cup my face. His thumb smoothed over my lower lip, but his touch was hesitant, like he was doubting what I’d said in the heat of the moment.

“I mean it,” I told him, squeezing his thighs. “I’m getting that cage off you, and then I’m not going to stop kissing you for hours. Days.”

The longing in his answering rumble was somehow so clear.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I decided to snoop while Mary was distracted with the military.

Gloam was sitting in that big leather armchair, reading a book and enjoying a rare moment of peace away from his captor. His long body looked looser, more relaxed after what we'd done earlier. My belly swooped with the memory of it.

When I told him I wanted to go scope out the garage for any tools, he hurriedly wrote in our notebook for me to be careful, to remain quiet, and told me the garage was in the basement under this part of the house, so I didn't need to go anywhere near the wing Mary occupied.

Do you want me to come with you? he asked.

"No, it's okay." I leaned down to kiss his shoulder. "You stay here and relax. I won't be long. Just going to poke around in there."

It wasn't a lie. I *did* want to go look around the garage for anything that could get the cage off. But I also wanted to go and see if I could find any clues to how Mary had enslaved him, or if there was a way to remove the cage without the risk of me hurting him by having to saw it off or something.

Maybe she had a key—not that I could spot any kind of lock on the thing. But it had been fastened around his head *somehow.* I'd already spotted the thick, bubbled seam cutting across the centre of the cage, telling me it had been welded together. But… surely they hadn't *welded it on his head*?

I shuddered at the thought as I snuck through the house, toward the central area. I didn't know if Mary occupied that bit, or just the east wing, but that question was answered when I slipped through a door into a huge front hall.

The space gleamed, an expanse of white marble floor reflecting the sunlight coming in through massive windows and an ornate skylight up above. There was a huge, sweeping staircase to one side of me, and dark wooden double doors leading outside to the other.

Feeling painfully exposed, I sprinted across the hall to the door opposite, which I was hoping would take me to the east wing. This was beyond

stupid. I didn’t even have a weapon. If Mary or the military spotted me in here, that would be it. All over. And Gloam still wouldn’t be free.

My heart was hammering as I slipped into a long corridor that looked similar to the one leading to the west wing, only this was much more sumptuously decorated. Thick grey carpeting muffled my footsteps as I walked between ornate gold wall fixtures and rose gold wallpaper with a subtle embossed pattern.

My lip curled beneath my mask—which I’d put on out of habit to go sneaking around. Mary evidently had fancy fuckin’ taste, but she was still a little thief. I highly doubted this had been her place pre monster apocalypse. More likely she came across it already abandoned and made herself comfortable here. She’d probably already been planning her collection when she did, and realised the barn would be a perfect place to house it.

I swiftly made my way up to the next floor, ears straining for any kind of sound. God, I hoped her creepy little pet was with her. I’d never seen her without it, so odds were it was still cradled in her arms out in the barn. Still, I couldn’t help but picture it flying out of one of these rooms and tearing my arm clean off with its stretching lamprey mouth.

At the end of the hall that I emerged into at the top of the stairs, there was a gaudy gold loveseat beside a flourishing parlour palm in a big clay pot. The door to one side of it was closed, but the one opposite was open.

Deciding to start there and make my way back, I hurried down the hallway and slipped inside, making sure I didn’t brush against the door to leave it in exactly the same position.

It was an office. A big, airy office, though the heavy dark blue drapes were drawn over the curtains, blocking out the light—a fact I was grateful for. I didn’t have to crawl around in here to remain unseen by peering eyes outside.

Two gold-stemmed lamps with stained-glass shades were already lit, a floor-standing one tucked into the corner beside a brown leather armchair, and the second on the massive wooden desk that filled the centre of the room.

A floor-to-ceiling bookcase lined the far wall, stuffed to the brim. I noticed that an entire shelf, roughly level with my shoulders, was filled with identical, slim brown leather books with blank spines.

Turning to the desk, I found another of those books resting on top of a dark green blotter, a heavy gold fountain pen set neatly against its spine.

Reaching out, I carefully flicked the cover back with my gloved fingers. I was paranoid enough about leaving fingerprints to wear them. The military *was* here, and I *was* technically a criminal who'd been banished from one of the cities.

The Journal of Mary Richings
Volume 25

I choked on an incredulous breath. *Volume 25?* What could that evil sicko *possibly* have to say that would fill twenty-five freaking journals? God, she was such a self-centred asshole.

Careful to keep the fountain pen in its exact spot so I'd know where to replace the journal, I picked up the leather book and started flicking through its pages. Each one was filled with an old-fashioned, curling scrawl that I struggled to read at first. Once I'd gotten to grips with her handwriting, I started searching for any mention of *aytorin, the Herald, monsters.* Even *Gloam*, though I doubted she knew he was called that.

I only spotted the odd mention of Gloam. She referred to him only as *the aytorin*, and all that she'd written about him were when they had left the mansion to go searching for monsters. She made Gloam capture them and chain them to him for the journey back. I'd already thought she must have —it wasn't like she'd ever get her hands dirty—but reading what she'd forced him to do made my heart hurt for him.

I quickly realised I was being an idiot, reading this *volume* that was clearly still a work in progress if it was out on her desk. She'd had Gloam for a while, I was sure. I carefully put it back exactly where I'd found it and looked fearfully over at the bookshelf stuffed with identical journals.

Where the fuck was I meant to start?

I had no idea how long Gloam had been with her. No idea how long she'd been part of the Herald's cult. No idea when she'd even started *writing* these things. She could've started keeping diaries as a kid. I did *not* want to read Mary's life history.

I was terrifyingly conscious of how long I was taking as I flicked frantically through book after book, desperately searching for any mention of Gloam that might have helped him. It wasn't until I got to the seventh volume that I finally hit paydirt.

As I flicked through the pages, a rough-torn scrap of paper fluttered out between two of them and fell to the ground. I quickly stuck my thumb between the pages so I didn't lose the spot it had been tucked into. I didn't know why, but I got a sense that this would be something.

Before I bent down to retrieve the paper, I scanned quickly over the words Mary had written in the journal—and froze. My breaths were loud and harsh behind my mask as I held the book in my gloved hands, my eyes bulging as I read what was on the page.

The Almighty Herald has granted me the greatest of gifts, the highest of honours. I am surely one of their chosen few! They have given me one of their sacred protectors to watch over me while I carry out my missionary work with the military.

How exciting! I told them of my plan—of my idea to get close to the military. They loved it. And now I can grow my collection safely, all while carrying out the Herald's divine work!

Their instructions were clear on how to control the beast: a single, simple command that will eclipse all others. 'Protect me from all danger.'

I say the words of power, his name, and then I say the command. So simple!

I must admit, I do find it highly amusing that the military so desperately wants to gain dominion over the new world creatures, and they have no idea there is a race that is SO easy to control. With just words! With just their names!

It will be my little secret—mine and the Herald's, now that they have blessed me with this knowledge. Perhaps when the upper echelons of the military are safely ensconced within our flock, they will find out the truth.

I was shivering when I reached the end of the page. So Mary was trying to draw the military into the Herald's cult. That was what the Herald had meant when they'd asked how her "work" was going with the military. They were trying to get the most powerful organisation in the country under their control, and Mary was the trusted missionary tasked with bringing them into the fold.

But that wasn't my focus. I read over the words about Gloam again, then again, my brow furrowing. '*Words of power. His name.*'

‘There is a race that is SO easy to control. With just words! With just their names!’

That was how she’d done it? With Gloam’s name?

My heart slammed against my ribcage. *I go by Gloam*, I remembered him writing in our first conversation. So it wasn’t his real name—because his real name was too dangerous for others to know.

I looked down at the scrap of discoloured paper that had fluttered to the floor from between the pages. It was resting innocently against the side of my boot. Feeling ill, I bent down to pick it up with trembling fingers. The scrap was worn but thick, almost soft to the touch, and its colouring made my gorge rise, because it didn’t look like normal paper. There was something wrong with its texture.

Trying not to think about it too much, I focused on the words written down. The language on the scrap of paper was something I had no hope of deciphering. It was entirely inhuman—so inhuman that it hurt my eyes to even look at.

But beneath it, there was Roman lettering. A translation, I assumed, to let Mary say the words.

The handwriting was different to Mary’s. Honestly, it reminded me of Gloam’s, but I’d seen his handwriting enough to be able to pick out the small differences. He wrote his As differently to this. I’d noticed because I loved seeing my name written in his jagged, elegant scrawl.

Had one of his brothers written this? Written down the instructions for the Herald—and then Mary—to control *their own brother?* Their flesh and blood. Their sibling who had grown with them in their father’s body. They’d given a terrible creature the key to force him against his will into an awful life of servitude and pain, just because he hadn’t wanted to follow the Herald like they had.

O Lanyr nor Faie Aedonimus ag ni Boetna elt Lonor no nirith om Wome.

I clutched the scrap between my hands, trying to keep my grip gentle for fear of tearing it. Was this the key to freeing Gloam? Or was this just how to enslave him? If I said the words, would it just put him under *my* control? I didn’t want him to be under anyone’s control. I wanted him free.

Was his name written here—his true name? I scanned the foreign words again with desperation, but none of them stuck out. All the words were too

alien for me to be able to tell which could be a name.

I carefully folded the scrap of paper and slid it into the inner breast pocket of my jacket, ignoring the fine tremble in my hands when I clutched Mary's journal again. I knew I had to put it back and slip out again soon, or risk staying here too long and being caught, but I needed to know if she'd written anything else that could help Gloam.

The beast's head is already caged—to stop him breaking free of the control, the Herald told me.

They are transferring the power over him to me tomorrow night, in a special ceremony just for me. They have three new coals who will be offered the gift of transcendence. If any of them refuse, we will have a great feast. It's such an honour!

At first I just stared blankly down at the page, horror freezing my brain as I pictured Mary sinking her teeth into roasted human flesh. And despair, because I still felt completely hopeless. This didn't help me get the cage off Gloam's head. I'd gotten stupidly distracted and wasted all this time. I hadn't even started *looking* for a key or any kind of object that could get the cage off. Maybe if I said the words on the scrap of paper, it would transfer control of him to me, but that wasn't a solution. That didn't free him from the cage or being under another's control.

Replacing the journal on the shelf and cursing myself for being a complete idiot, I hurriedly started searching through the desk drawers, easing them open carefully so I didn't disturb the contents. Half of them were empty and the rest contained nothing but useless crap. More pens, a heavy gold lighter and a packet of cigarettes—which I was sorely tempted to steal—and some documents with a military letterhead and the words TRANSFER OF OWNERSHIP in big, thick letters across the top.

None of that helped me. There was nothing that resembled anything remotely like a key or a weird, otherworldly device that would remove Gloam's cage.

Trying to ignore the devastation brimming inside me, I made sure that everything was exactly in its place before heading back to the door. I stood there for a few seconds, my heart pounding as I listened for any sounds. I'd been here too long.

It was dead quiet. Not wanting to risk hesitating even longer and getting stuck in this wing of the house, I took off back down the corridor, my boots silent on the thick, plush carpet. The huge lobby was still empty and gleaming, and I ran across it to get back to the safety of the west wing.

I still had to go look in the garage. It was going to take old-fashioned physical labour to get that cage off Gloam's head. I needed something that could cut through metal. Thick metal. What were the odds that whoever had lived in this ridiculous mansion even knew what power tools were?

Just as Gloam had described, the garage was in the basement level of the house. When I stepped inside, catching the heavy door behind me before it slammed shut, my footsteps echoed across the cavernous space.

Eight supercars were parked neatly along the far wall, still pristine and gleaming as if they were brand new. One of the spaces was empty. I swallowed, staring at them. People didn't have cars like this anymore. They didn't make them. No one could afford anything close to this level of extravagance these days.

A tiny part of me—the young part that had actually enjoyed apprenticing for a mechanic when I was a teenager—was foaming at the mouth to find the keys, grab Gloam, and drive any one of these cars out of this place with a roar of the engine and a middle finger held high in the air as we left Mary in the dust.

I smiled a little at the thought of Gloam's big body squeezed into one of these things. There was no way he'd fit. We'd be walking back to the camp—if he wanted to come with me. He'd never said if he did.

Ignoring the pang in my stomach, I looked around for anything that might have resembled an *actual* garage, the kind filled with discarded junk and rarely used tools for odd DIY jobs around the house. But there was nothing else in here except for the wide metal shutters at the top of a gentle ramp that had let the previous owners of this place drive their fancy cars out.

As I turned to examine the wall behind me, hopelessness making my shoulders droop, I realised there was another door tucked into the corner. My last shot, I suspected. My last shot at finding *anything* that would help Gloam.

I actually laughed when I stepped into the room and saw that it was a workshop—a quiet chuckle that felt like it was coming from someone else. Renewed hope buoyed me. There were tools here. Actual *tools.* This must

have been the groundskeeper's space, because there was a ride-on lawnmower stowed in the corner, with strimmers and hedge clippers hung neatly from hooks above it.

There was even a freaking *workbench.* I hurried toward it and scanned the tools hung in evenly spaced rows on the wall above. There was nothing that would be powerful enough to get the cage off. I spotted a saw, its teeth still sharp and gleaming, but the blade was more likely to snap before I even got close to getting through the thick metal of the cage.

Everything was arranged and stowed in an orderly fashion, making it easy for me to scan over what could and couldn't work. I hefted a chainsaw into my hands with a grunt, unease making my gut churn. The idea of going anywhere *near* Gloam's head with this thing was liable to make me throw up.

Then I spotted it. On the lower shelf of the workbench were power tools. A drill, an orbital sander, a jigsaw. And an angle grinder.

My heart was banging against my ribs as I knelt down and reached out to take it. It looked brand new.

This could work.

I straightened up and looked around frantically for a power socket. My breaths were quick and unsteady as I found one and plugged it in. Heart in my throat, I switched it on, jumping when its angry, high-pitched whir filled the air.

Fuck, this could work. *This could work.*

I turned it back off, somewhat irrationally worried that the motor would suddenly die and it would be useless. I'd break down completely if that happened. I'd finally found something that could get the cage off Gloam's head. We were so close.

Desperate to get back to him, I unplugged the grinder and carefully wound the cord around the handle before running out of the garage, past all those gleaming cars, and back through the house to our room.

Gloam was pacing when I burst through the door out of breath, his big body tense with frantic energy. I quickly set the angle grinder on the bed as he strode over and ran his hands through my hair, down my face and shoulders, checking I was alright.

His wide shoulders heaved with a shuddering breath, and he quickly turned to scribble in the notebook.

You've been gone a long time. I went to look for you in the garage and you weren't there.

I flushed as I pulled off my mask, feeling like shit for making him worry. "I'm sorry, I went—I just wanted to look around quickly while she was distracted. For anything that could help."

Gloam tensed again as he wrote, his huge biceps bulging.

Where did you go, Adam?

I let out a shaky breath, feeling like a kid about to be scolded.

"I just… Okay, don't get mad. I'm fine. No one saw me. But… I found Mary's office."

When I heard him suck in a sharp breath beneath his cage, I hurried to continue.

"I found something, Gloam. I think it… I think it's how she got control over you."

He went totally still. With trembling fingers, I reached into the inside pocket of my jacket and pulled out the slip of paper.

I didn't know if he recognised it, but he was slow to reach out and take it from me when I held it out. Even when he unfolded it and read the words written there, he remained perfectly still.

My heart plummeted when he didn't react at all.

"I…" My voice was small, and I was suddenly doubting my gut instinct that this was important. "Maybe it's nothing but I… It felt like something you should have."

As if finally realising I was waiting for him to acknowledge it, Gloam looked up and gently cupped my chin. His caged head dipped once in a jerky nod.

I watched in silence as he carefully refolded the slip of paper and tucked it into the pocket of his pants, the links of the chain wrapped around his forearm clinking softly.

My breath left me in a rush. I'd suspected he wouldn't be able to tell me anything, but it was still hard to be left in the dark about what that scrap of paper meant. What it said.

I hoped he would tell me when he could. When the cage was off.

The thought made my stomach lurch with fearful anticipation. I glanced at the angle grinder resting on the bed, then back at Gloam.

I swallowed. "I found something else too."

Gloam's head tilted in a question. Licking my dry lips, I picked up the angle grinder.

"I—I think I can get the cage off with this."

He went still again. For a brief, terrifying moment, I wondered if the all-encompassing order to *protect Mary* would force him to hurt me, or at least stop me from getting the cage off. It had stopped him from telling me things that would point me in the right direction.

When Gloam reached for me, I barely managed to suppress my flinch, a tiny part of me expecting him to attack because of the compulsion. My face flushed with shame when he did nothing more than cup my cheek. I desperately hoped he hadn't noticed.

His hand was trembling. I was breathing too hard as I stared back at him, my heart hammering.

"Do you want to try?" I asked quietly, reaching up to hold onto his wrist.

Realising I was still wearing my gloves, I quickly stripped them off so I could feel the warmth of his bare skin against mine.

Gloam was still for a long moment, his big body trembling like he was fighting with himself. Then he gave a single, tiny nod.

I bit my lip and pulled his hand from my cheek, leading him over to sit on the side of the bed, close to the headboard.

"Okay."

My voice was as shaky as my hands when I shoved the nightstand out of the way, yanking out the old lamp to plug in the angle grinder.

"Okay. We can do this, Gloam. We're so close. And then we can—we can get away from here and never see her again. I'll never let her hurt you again, I promise."

I was babbling, trying to distract myself from the terror of what I was about to do. I was about to hold a spinning, razor-sharp blade mere millimetres from my beastie's head. If I slipped, even a little, I would kill him.

I gulped, staring at the angle grinder in my hands.

Gloam gently took it from me and set it down beside him on the bed.

Grabbing our notebook, he wrote, *You don't have to do this, Adam.*

My back stiffened. "Yes, I do. I *do*. You're getting free, Gloam."

That fierce determination was dampened when I looked back down at the angle grinder. I swallowed hard around the lump in my throat.

“I… I’m just scared of hurting you,” I whispered, reaching out and curling my fingers under the straps of his harness, wanting to be tethered to him somehow.

Gloam wrote something in the notebook. After handing it to me, he reached out and rested his huge palm on my sternum, the warmth of it seeping through my shirt.

Don’t be scared, my Adam, I read. *I know you won’t.*

But he couldn’t know that. My hand could slip. I could cut through too far. Fear froze me in place for long moments, and only the gentle rub of Gloam’s big palm against my chest let me exhale a shuddery breath.

“Will they hear us?” I whispered.

Gloam shook his head and took back the notebook.

You might not be able to hear it, but Seraph is screaming in his cage. No doubt because of the military. They will hear nothing over that.

Seraph? Who was Seraph? That horrifying monster with too many eyes?

I didn’t have the mental capacity to think about it any further. Gloam said they wouldn’t hear. I trusted him.

“Okay.” My voice was small. Scared. “Okay, let’s do this. All we can do is try.”

I picked up the angle grinder.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

In the end, the cage came off shockingly easily—a fact that devastated me, but I didn't tell Gloam that. No one had ever tried to help him, and it hadn't even been all that hard. The thought was utterly heartbreaking.

Not that many people knew how to help him—except his brothers. Rage tightened my chest. I hoped they rotted forever in that sick place with the Herald. Especially because they were the ones who'd done this to him. They could do it again, if they ever saw him.

I'd never let this happen to him again. I'd die trying to stop it.

As soon as the two halves of the cage broke free, Gloam quickly raised his hands to cup the front under his chin while I switched off the tool and eased the back half away. It was mind-boggingly heavy.

My eyes watered at my first glimpse of his head—not even his face, just the back of his head. He was bald, and his grey skin darkened into a deep black stain across the back of his skull. Like someone had dipped an ink-laden paintbrush into water and let it seep over his crown.

I could see the backs of his ears. Perfect, sweet ears that tapered slightly at the top, like the wings of a butterfly.

Heart hammering, emotion clogging my throat, I set the back half of the cage and the angle grinder on the bed, then pressed a reverent kiss to the top of his skull.

Gloam shuddered and made a low sound, but he wasn't pulling away the rest of the cage.

"Gloam?"

I moved around and lifted my hands to lower it, but he shook his head quickly.

I swallowed, panic rising. "What's wrong?"

Slowly, being painstakingly careful, he eased the front of the cage away less than an inch. And I realised why he was still holding it up.

I covered my mouth when I saw the two thick, rusted rings piercing his lower jaw, welded to the inside of the cage. Holding his mouth open, protruding over his teeth between two short, sharp tusks that jutted up.

"Fuck." My eyes overflowed, tears streaming down my face. "Fuck, Gloam. Oh my god. I—I'm—"

I wanted to apologise, for some reason. As though I'd been the one to do this to him. I should have guessed it would have been more than just the cage stealing his voice. I should have realised that wouldn't have been enough to stop him from talking.

I should have known Mary would have been this sick. She'd pierced his spine with metal rings too.

But then, this hadn't even been Mary. The cage had already been on him when the Herald gave Gloam to Mary. This had been his *brothers*. His fucking *brothers* had shoved thick metal rings through his jaw and into his mouth, then welded them to the cage they'd encased around his head.

I couldn't even take in the rest of Gloam's face now that it was uncovered. I couldn't tear my eyes from those rusted rings. If he let go of the cage face, would it rip off his lower jaw? The horror of it made me let out a weak sob, and I finally lifted my streaming eyes to his when he made another low sound.

Wide, rectangular pupils gazed back at me mournfully, dark and fringed in thick lashes. The pain in them made me sob again, but it also filled me with the burning need to help him. To take away that pain. I was sitting here blubbering while Gloam was still fucking *maimed.*

My hand was trembling when I reached for the angle grinder. *Fuck. I can't do this. I can't do this. I'll hurt him. What if I cut him? What if my hand slips and I slice right into his face? Or his throat?*

"C-c-can you hold it still?" I asked Gloam in a trembling voice, trying to stop my hand from shaking around the grinder.

He nodded once, carefully moving his hands so I could reach the bottom of those rings. I switched the angle grinder back on, the loud buzz making me jump, but then I froze up. I was panting with fear, terrified I was going to hurt him.

"A—Aaad—"

My chin trembled, fresh tears dripping down my face as Gloam tried to say my name.

"D-don't try and speak. Don't hurt yourself." I took a deep, shuddering breath and tried to calm down.

Come on, Adam, you can do this. For him.

"I'll be careful," I told him needlessly as I slid off the bed on shaky legs to kneel beside him, tilting my head to look up under his jaw.

There was so much dried blood under there—years' worth. Years of those rusted rings tearing up his skin and the sensitive, vulnerable flesh inside his mouth. Years of them holding his jaw locked open wide, unable to make anything more than guttural sounds and clicks.

Determination chased away some of the panic, enough to push my wild emotions aside and focus on the task at hand. I needed to get him free. We were so close. He was so close to being free.

"I'm sorry," I whispered as I raised the angle grinder with steadier hands, knowing this was going to hurt.

Gloam's big body tightened with pain when the blade touched the first ring. The vibration from it alone was no doubt incredibly uncomfortable. I sliced through the ring as close to his skin as I dared, then sliced through it again close to the cage. The neat, curved section of metal I'd removed dropped into Gloam's lap.

A few minutes later, a second bit from the other ring did the same. I switched off the tool and set it down, then lifted my once again shaking hands to help Gloam steady the cage.

"We're—we're going to have to slowly tilt it down," I told him in a trembling voice. "To ease the rings around and out."

He went to nod, stopping himself with a sharp, pained intake of breath. The vibration of the angle grinder had opened the wounds, causing fresh, rich brown blood to drip from Gloam's chin to his lap. My breaths were loud through my nose as I pursed my lips together tight, but I managed to hold back more tears. Tears wouldn't help him.

Together, we slowly eased the cage away from the top part of his face, tilting it down so the rings twisted in his jaw until I felt them suddenly pop free as the gap I'd created made it through. I could see how much pain he was in, his eyes tight. We carefully manoeuvred that gap over his chin and teeth until I could pull the entire cage front away with trembling hands.

Blood gushed from the big holes in Gloam's lower jaw. He was shaking, but when I looked into his eyes, they were bright with relief. He blinked, and a single tear dripped onto his cheek.

"Adam," he croaked, his deep voice thick and pained.

I burst into tears.

I didn't dare throw my arms around him, terrified of hurting him. I clung onto his blood-soaked hand, but it wasn't enough. Still kneeling beside the

bed, I scrambled between his thighs and wrapped my arms around his middle, tipping my head into his hard stomach.

Gloam's blood was everywhere. Dripping from his chin, running down his throat and chest, covering his hands and streaking my arms. I could feel the puddle of it in his lap soaking my shirt. I could smell it in my nose and feel its sticky wetness on my face. I could feel it dripping onto the top of my head, still pouring from the wounds.

His trembling hands came up to cup the back of my head as I wept into his skin like a baby. I knew I was being selfish—this wasn't about me. I wasn't the one who had been horrifically maimed. But the horror of what he'd been put through, combined with the relief at finally getting that cage off, made me weak.

"Ad—"

He tried to whisper my name again, but his voice cut off with a wet gurgle. Fresh terror streaking through me, I jerked back to stare up at him. I could see dark brown blood coating the inside of his lips. My mouth trembled.

"Just spit it out." I clambered up on shaking legs and knelt beside him on the bed, placing one palm flat on his blood-streaked chest. "W-we need to clean your mouth out somehow."

Gloam turned and spat a thick mouthful of dark brown blood onto the floor, his broad back heaving. I could see unnatural flecks in it—orangey red speckles that looked rough. Rust.

"L-let me—We need salt water. Or spirits." I pressed frantic kisses over his shoulder as I stood up from the bed, locking my trembling knees. "Wait here. I'll go and find something."

He grabbed my hand as I started heading for the door. His voice was thick and hoarse.

"B-be care—"

"I will."

I couldn't stop myself from leaning down and pressing a kiss to the top of his smooth head. Two tiny, nubby horns jutted out from above his temples. They were a deep black colour, covered in velvet, but the fronts of them looked lighter and shiny—like they'd been worn away after years of rubbing constantly against the inside of the cage.

I kissed one, unable to help myself. Gloam shuddered, his fingers tightening on my hand. He let go and watched me leave through those goat-

like eyes.

I hurried downstairs, making far too much noise as I frantically searched for the kitchen. But the house was still dead quiet. Mary was all the way on the other side of the vast property, in the barn with the military. She hadn't even heard the shrill rasp of the angle grinder. For once, I was grateful she was such an obnoxious asshole.

There was obviously no booze in the old kitchen. I'd already figured we were in the former staff quarters because of the maid uniforms in the closet, but mainly because it wasn't as opulent as the other part of the house. After frantically opening cupboards, I found a big tub of table salt tucked into the back of one. Grabbing it and an old glass jug, I hurried back upstairs.

The room looked like a crime scene when I stepped back inside. The old white sheets were soaked in blood, and when Gloam stood up unsteadily from the bed upon my arrival, the pool that had formed in the crotch of his leather pants dripped onto the wooden floor in a pattering shower. The two pieces from the metal rings thudded onto the floorboards.

"I found salt."

I cradled the items to my chest, freeing up a hand so I could link my blood-sticky fingers through Gloam's and pull him into the bathroom.

He waited patiently, trembling less now, as I filled the jug and dumped in a load of salt. I quietly panicked about what I was doing. Did it have to be an exact ratio of salt to water? What if I put too much in? Would it hurt him? Would it do anything at all?

"Okay." My voice was wobbly as I held out the jug to Gloam. "Gargle this. Don't swallow."

He did as I said, leaning over the sink and bringing the jug to his mouth. Half of the water immediately streamed back out of those holes under his jaw, brown and thick with his blood and flecked with rust. He spat the rest into the sink, equally as dirty, and did it again and again until the water was mainly clear.

I grabbed several towels from the stack in the cupboard and soaked one with warm water. Tangling my fingers with Gloam's, I urged him to kneel on the bathroom floor with me. I could see how unsteady he was.

"Let me clean you up."

I started with his hands, gently stroking the soaked towel down each of his long fingers and between them, before turning them over and carefully

wiping his palms. Once his hands were clean, I lifted them to my mouth and kissed each of his knuckles.

I used the same towel to clean his chest and throat, then grabbed a new one for his face. After stretching up to the sink to soak it in warm water, I took a breath and forced a wobbly smile onto my face as I looked at Gloam kneeling patiently opposite me.

"It's so good to see you," I whispered as I raised the towel and carefully started wiping his chin and mouth clean.

I was painstakingly gentle when he tilted his head back so I could get to the underside of his jaw. The sight of those raw holes piercing his grey skin made me swallow hard.

When the last of the blood was gone, I felt calmer. Calm enough to sit back and truly take in his wonderful face.

It was broad, with heavy cheekbones and a wide, flat nose that didn't dip into a bridge between his eyes. I took in those unusual pupils properly—they were wide and rectangular, like a goat's, and solid black within white sclera.

He had no eyebrows, but those ridged cables decorated his forehead in elegant curves, giving the illusion of them. They connected to three smaller, more jagged ridges between his eyes, but it was the same cabling that curved over his cheekbones and in two lines on his chin, directly under the sweet little tusks I could see peeking between his full lips. He also had two small fangs in the upper set of his teeth, giving his mouth a predatory look. But I knew he'd never, ever hurt me.

More cabled lines extended up from his ears to the smooth dome of his bald head, curving fluidly around those nubby, velvety little horns that were so sweet I just wanted to rub my cheek against them.

My chin trembled, and I gave him a watery smile.

"There you are," I said, reaching up to cup the side of his face, tracing the tip of my finger around the base of his horn. "I knew you weren't ugly. I told you."

It was the least important thing in the world in that moment, but I had to say it. I had to tell him how I felt—what it meant to finally *see* him.

"You're perfect," I croaked, fresh tears welling. I blinked fast to suck them back, trying to get a grip.

Gloam shook his head, but his full mouth tilted into a sweet, tiny smile. I could see thin lines of dried blood in the cracks of his dry lips, and I quickly

scrambled up to rinse the jug and fill it with fresh water.

“I know you don’t need to drink, but I’d feel better if you did,” I told him, handing him the jug as I knelt back down. “Just a little. For your throat.”

Gloam clutched the jug in one big hand while he raised the other to cup my cheek, thumb smoothing over my lower lip. He lifted the jug and tipped it to his mouth. Only thin trickles streaked with brown escaped the holes under his chin. They were healing fast.

Relief coursed through me, until Gloam lowered the jug and I heard the gentle clink of metal coming from him. My eyes darted down to the chain around his arm. I was so used to seeing it now that my brain tended to block it out.

“W-we still have to get the rings out of your back.”

I’d have to put him through more pain. And fuck, this would be more dangerous. *Far* more dangerous.

What if I accidentally severed his spine?

I froze up, hands shaking wildly as I stared at Gloam through panicked, unseeing eyes. What if I killed him? What if I paralysed him? I couldn’t—I didn’t—

He shook his head and put down the jug to cup my face tenderly.

“W-we—c-ca—”

“No, don’t try and speak,” I blurted, scrambling up and stumbling into the bedroom to grab our notebook. “Don’t. You need to heal first. We’ll keep talking this way.”

When I returned and knelt opposite him, Gloam had soaked a clean towel in the water left in the jug. He carefully wiped my hands and face free of his blood, which made me want to start crying again.

I watched as he set the towel down and flipped open our notebook, scribbling something with the pencil I handed him when he found a blank page. He turned it so I could see.

We can’t remove the rings yet.

“Wh-why not?” I whispered.

I wasn’t sure I’d be able to handle knowing that task was still looming. That I’d have to put Gloam through pain again.

Mary cannot know.

I stared at his words.

“Wh-what? Why can’t we just leave right now?” I gestured at the window. “She’s distracted. We’ll easily be able to get away.”

I wasn’t so sure on the easy part, but surely now was the best time, while she’d banished Gloam to remain unseen in the old, unused part of the mansion and was busy sweet-talking the military.

Gloam’s hand spasmed around the pencil, and my heart plummeted. Had it not worked?

He struggled to get anything down at first.

What you said before, he eventually wrote. His hand spasmed again. *Words.*

I sat frozen for a moment as I frantically tried to remember. My brain was scrambled from everything that had happened.

“A spell?” I blurted. “You… you have to say words to break it? Can’t you just say them now?”

He didn’t move, body vibrating with tension—with the desperate desire to answer me when he couldn’t.

“You have to say them to her?” I guessed. “Because she’s the one who has control over you?”

I thought of the scrap of suspect paper now tucked inside Gloam’s pocket.

“What if I said those words? On—on the paper? So I had control?” I cringed even voicing the idea. I didn’t want to control him. “Then you just say the words to me and we can go. We don’t have to go and see Mary at all.”

Gloam shook his head sharply, his textured brow furrowing.

I didn’t understand. Desperation made me cling to his free hand.

“I would never try and control you, Gloam. I promise. I won’t—I swear on my life I wouldn’t—”

He shook his head again, a small smile touching his lips.

I know you wouldn’t, my precious Adam. That’s not why.

“Then why?” I asked frantically, desperate to understand.

There is more to do.

That told me nothing, and I could feel my face going red with hopeless frustration.

First I must heal. So I can speak.

Okay. Okay, that made sense. I took a deep, shuddering breath, trying to calm down. “Okay.”

Then the rest.

I suspected this was something he couldn't tell me. That it fell outside his overarching compulsion to *protect Mary.* But we didn't need to hurt her, did we? We could just escape. Gloam could say the words, and she would be powerless, but she wouldn't be *in danger*.

But did the compulsion extend even further than I'd thought? Was Gloam trapped in an endless loop where every single action, even the one that could free him, went against his order to protect her?

Was there no way out of it?

I wasn't even thinking about the other beasties anymore, which made guilt flood my gut like acid, but Gloam was more important. Getting Gloam free was the most important thing. Maybe one day we could return and free them, but right now, my body was straining with the singular need to get Gloam away from this place. Away from her.

My chin trembled as fresh tears spilled over.

"I just want you to be free," I told him, voice wavering. "I just want us to get away, Gloam. Together. I w-want you to stay with me."

He cupped my cheek in a gentle hand, those long, rectangular pupils flickering as he watched me. His expression was soft. Calm. Like he wasn't worried about whatever else he had to do to be free from Mary's control.

He removed his hand to write more words. When I read them, I choked on my next breath.

You have to put the cage back on, Adam.

"N-no," I stammered, horrified. "I can't. I can't do that to you."

You have to. Mary cannot know yet.

I shook my head.

"No." My voice was weak and trembling.

There is nothing we can do while the military is still here. While I am still healing. She cannot know.

I let out a pathetic sob. "Please don't make me."

You must.

"B-but how?" I gestured through the open bathroom door at the blood-soaked bedroom, the split cage discarded on the stained sheets. "It's in two halves. If I weld it back together…"

What if I couldn't get it off again?

It needs to be done so I can easily remove it again when the time comes, but without Mary realising.

I stared at his words. That sounded impossible.

But he needed me to do it. He needed me to find a way. I didn't fully understand why, but I trusted him.

"A-alright." I reached up and wiped my wet cheeks, then rubbed my puffy eyes. "I'll—Let me go back to the garage and see what I can find."

Gloam made a soft sound in his throat and lowered his head to write more words. As I peered down at them, his big hand smoothed over my hair.

You are very brave, Adam.

I choked on a weak, humourless laugh. "No, I'm not. I'm shitting myself."

Go and see what you can find, my love. I will be here.

I bit down hard on my lip as I read his words—what he'd called me. As I scrambled to my feet and made my way through the quiet house back to the garage, a sweet, piercing pain speared through my chest.

I did love him. I loved him so much it hurt.

He was so gentle and kind and smart. Strong—not just physically, but mentally, even after all he'd been put through. He had protected me so much. Looked after me. And I realised… I realised that I looked after him too. That I wasn't too stupid or useless to be of value to him in return. It wasn't a one-sided thing, where he gave and I just took. I had given him companionship out here. And affection. And hope.

I remembered what we had said to each other, after the first time we'd come together and touched intimately, furtively in the dark out in the Wastes beside Mary's RV. He was important to me, but I was important to him too.

We fit.

I was gone for a while, because it took me some time to find anything that could work.

Something to hide the fact that the cage has been broken, but is easy enough for him to break free from when the time comes.

In the end, I found a small tube of industrial-strength superglue, the kind that could glue heavy steel girders to walls and they wouldn't budge. I tested it carefully, using only a tiny amount to secure some weighty metal

tools to the wall. They didn't budge after just a few minutes, even when I leaned on them with my full weight, standing on the very toes of my boots and grunting as I tried to see if they would come free.

But then I started panicking that it was too strong as I made my way back to the bedroom with the glue in hand, as well as a metal file I'd found. What if Gloam couldn't get the cage back off when he needed to? I didn't know what he needed to do, but I suspected he would have precious few seconds to do it.

If he struggled to break apart the cage, Mary would have enough time to bark another order at him to stop him. She could order him to kill himself if she realised he was close to getting free. She could order him to slit his own throat or rip out his tongue so it wouldn't even matter about the cage.

"O-okay, I found this industrial glue." I shut the bedroom door behind me and hurried to the bed, where Gloam was sitting with the two halves of the cage in his lap. "But we should test it first, to make sure you can get it off."

I bent to pick up the two sliced away pieces of the metal rings from the ground, lips tightening at the sight of the blood and rust caking them. Dabbing a spot of glue on the shiny cut ends, I pressed them together and waited.

After several long minutes, I held it out to Gloam.

"See if you can get them apart."

He took the makeshift oval from me and effortlessly pulled the two halves apart.

I spluttered out a watery laugh, feeling stupid for worrying that my big, strong beastie wouldn't be able to tear apart *glue*.

"Okay." I tried to smile at him. "This could work."

But then I hesitated. I didn't want to put the cage back on him. I didn't want to hide away his sweet, broad face again.

"D-do we have to do it right now?"

Gloam picked up the notebook he'd brought with him from the bathroom and wrote.

It is safest, Adam. We don't know when the military will leave, and she could call for me at any time. Before I'm ready.

I shuddered out a breath and forced myself to nod, my voice small when I said, "Okay."

But first, I picked up the angle grinder and sliced away the rest of the rings that had been impaled through Gloam's jaw. Then I filed down the remaining sharp edges with the metal file I'd found, so that they wouldn't catch on his skin when the cage was back on.

Not wanting to waste any of the small amount of glue we had, I laid out the two halves of the cage on the bed and carefully applied the thick, clear liquid to the edges. I was breathing hard in concentration, leaning over the bed. My hand somehow remained steady, despite the frantic energy making me jittery.

"We just have to wait for it to get a bit tacky," I told Gloam as I recapped the tube and set it down.

While we waited, I got to my knees between his legs. He was so big that I still had to tilt my head up to look at him, my arms rising to carefully frame his beautiful face in my hands.

I took in every detail that I could before it was hidden again. His long, wide irises that probably let him read more words in one go than I ever could, I realised with a brief, fragile bubble of amusement. His prominent, bridgeless nose and textured, hairless brows. Those little tusks and fangs peeking out from between his slightly parted lips. The strangely beautiful ridges and cables decorating his cheeks and forehead and chin.

I didn't want to kiss him on the lips, too worried it would hurt him, so instead I stretched my body up and pressed my mouth gently to the wide, flat bridge of his nose, then his cheek. I could feel the textured, cabled ridge there against my lips.

I pulled back to look at him, into those strange, inhuman eyes with their horizontal pupils.

"I love you," I told him, before I carefully enclosed his head back in the cage.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

We moved to another room, leaving the blood-soaked one behind. It wasn't dark yet, but we lay down together on the bed in silence for a long time, my head on Gloam's chest as I traced over the cables winding under his skin. His fingers sifted through my hair, and at some point I fell asleep when the day caught up with me. I was wrung out and exhausted.

When I woke up, Gloam had tucked me under the covers and was no longer on the bed with me. My eyes still felt tight from crying, but I could tell that I'd slept right through the night. The light seeping into the room was washed out and pale, the sun not yet fully risen. I guessed I was still operating on furtive-Wastes-sneaking sleeping hours.

When I moved to sit up, something crinkled against my hand. Wiping my bleary eyes, I unfolded the slip of paper that had been tucked into my loose fist while I slept. It was a torn-out page from our notebook.

O Hein nor Faie wi no Aedonimus ag ni Boetna.

I stared at the words. I could tell Gloam had written it, but his handwriting was shaky and more jagged than usual. Like it had taken him effort, and time, to get the words down.

Which surely meant they were to do with getting him free.

My breathing sped up. Why had he given me this? Did I… Did I need to say this? Was this how he broke Mary's hold over him? But why did *I* need to say it? I thought *he* had to say something to end it.

A whisper of sound jerked my head up, and I realised Gloam was still in the room. He was standing by the window, completely still, no doubt watching for any movement from the military.

"Are they still here?" I whispered, even though I didn't need to. If they hadn't heard us fucking or the relentless shriek of the angle grinder, they definitely wouldn't have been able to hear us speak.

Gloam's caged head turned toward me. He nodded.

I exhaled a weary breath and reached up to scrub at my face. Then I lifted the scrap of paper.

"Is this… Do I need to learn this?"

Gloam was very still for a long moment, before he dipped his chin once.

"Okay." Determination strengthened my resolve as I looked back down at the paper, even though the weight of this responsibility made my shoulders hunch. "I won't let you down. I promise, Gloam."

I hesitated.

"Will I… Will I know when I need to say it?" I asked, looking back up at him.

He nodded again. I already missed seeing his face. Hearing him speak, even though he'd barely said anything at all, and his voice had been rough and thick with pain and blood. I couldn't wait until he could speak to me properly. Until I could hear him say my name again.

"How's your jaw?" I asked as I carefully placed the scrap of paper on the nightstand and got out of bed.

He stepped away from the window, meeting me halfway and wrapping his arms around me when I buried my face against his chest. I breathed in his scent, the faint tinge of metal still there—I wondered if it always would be—and his warmth soaking into my bare chest, even though the chain around his arm was cold against my back. I'd taken off my blood-soaked shirt and scrubbed it in the bathroom when we moved to the new room.

My eyes squeezed shut when I heard him whisper within his cage, "Nearly healed."

My next breath shuddering out of me, I pressed a kiss to the centre of his chest.

"Good."

Reluctantly pulling free from his arms long minutes later, I tried to pat down my hair as I crossed over to the pile of my discarded clothes. I knew my shirt would still be damp where it hung drying in the bathroom, so I pulled out my spare and shoved it on.

"So we just need to wait?" I asked Gloam as I dressed.

He had moved back to the window and was completely still again. Just watching.

When he nodded, I sighed and walked over to the bed, sinking down on the edge as I picked up that scrap of paper.

I stared down at it, moving my eyes carefully over each word, soundlessly trying to shape them with my mouth. I was sure I'd fuck up the pronunciation, but hopefully I would be able to get it out well enough to help him.

When Gloam brought the notebook over, where he'd written, *Are you hungry?* on the page, I lifted my head to smile up at him.

"I'm okay. Thank you. Maybe later."

My stomach was too knotted up with nerves to eat at all.

Gloam was relying on me. I needed to learn this, and I needed to stay sharp so I could pay attention—so I knew when I had to say these words.

I wondered what they meant.

The military didn't leave until the following morning.

We stayed in that room all day, and I spent most of it reading and re-reading the words on the scrap of paper, memorising them. At some point Gloam got me something to eat and forced me to stop and drink some water when I mumbled about a headache forming.

When it started getting dark, Gloam stood by the window and—telling me after in our notebook, in the last of the dying light—watched the military leave the barn and head to the guest house, while Mary and her shulc came back to the main house. I got tense when I knew she was in the same building as us, but no sound travelled down to this end—not until a very faint but shrill ringing made me jump out of my skin.

I clenched my jaw when I realised what it was. Mary's bell. She was summoning Gloam.

I jumped up to wrap my arms around him and press a kiss to his chest before he left. And then I paced the room, wondering what she was making him do.

It felt like he was gone for hours. Eventually I got tired and curled up on the bed. I wanted to keep going over the words, but I didn't dare turn on a light in case anyone spotted it.

The room felt cold without Gloam. But I didn't want to get under the covers, because I knew I'd fall asleep. I wanted to wait for him to get back, to make sure he was alright. That the cage hadn't somehow fallen apart in front of Mary and she'd made him do something horrific to himself to keep him under her control.

My eyes burned with the need for sleep as I lay there in the dark, staring at the door. When I next blinked, the room was suddenly light from weak

morning sun, and I could feel Gloam's big, warm body curled around my back on the bed. Relief turned my limbs to jelly.

"I tried to stay awake," I whispered, twisting around in the cradle of his arms to face him. "Sorry."

The cage was still on, the sight of it filling me with a weird mix of relief and sadness. At least it meant Mary was still clueless.

Gloam rumbled a low sound and raised a hand to cup my cheek, smoothing his thumb over the corner of my mouth. I tilted my head to kiss the pad of it, part of me wanting to suck it into my mouth and distract both of us while we waited for the right moment to confront Mary.

But it wasn't the time for that. I was too tense. Too nervous about what was coming—and I didn't even really know what that was.

We both froze when the faint sound of car doors opening and slamming shut drifted up to the window. Gloam squeezed my shoulder, his hand trailing down my arm as he got up and went over to watch. I sat up quickly in the bed, staring at him.

"Are they leaving?" I whispered, and after a few long moments, he nodded.

I could hear engines starting, and Mary's ingratiating, high-pitched voice saying something before a final car door slammed. Then came the sound of tyres crunching over gravel as they drove away.

Neither of us moved in the minutes that followed. I thought I faintly heard those big metal gates being padlocked shut again, then nothing.

Gloam moved from the window in a sudden rush, as if realising he didn't have much time before Mary would summon him with her stupid fucking bell. Grabbing the notebook, he knelt beside the bed and hurriedly scribbled.

It is time. When she calls for me, follow out of sight. His hand paused, before he wrote more slowly. *Please know that what you see is what needs to be done.*

Shit, that sounded ominous. Unnerved, I swallowed and looked at his cage as I nodded.

"I trust you," I whispered, curling my fingers around his free hand. "I'm with you, Gloam. Whatever you have to do."

He let go of the notebook and cradled my palm between both of his. They were so big they hid my hand entirely.

"Adam," I heard him whisper beneath his cage.

My chin quivered, but I took a deep breath, trying to prepare myself.

"Are you healed enough?" I asked, then flinched when the faint tinkle of Mary's bell sounded from the other side of the mansion. "Are you ready?"

He nodded, letting go of my hand to straighten up to his full, towering height. After cupping my chin for a brief moment, he turned and headed for the door.

He grabbed his war hammer from where it rested against the wall on the way.

Fuck. Fuck. Okay. It's happening.

I scrambled up and shoved on my jacket and gloves, fixing my mask over my mouth. I should have spent at least a little time trying to find a weapon of some kind in here, I realised too late as I slipped out of the room, gripping that scrap of paper in my fist. I was sure I knew the words on it, sure I could get them out when Gloam needed me to, but I was also fully aware that I froze up under pressure. Fear turned me into a useless statue and I knew I would be terrified for him, even though I didn't know what was coming.

My heart thundered in my chest as I slipped out of the mansion and into the cool morning air. The sunlight was weak, fog still curling at the bases of the trees in the forest beyond the property wall. I could see the two borolesh among the trees tucked into the corner beside a small, manmade lake.

As I peered around the building, I spotted Gloam following Mary into the barn.

"Okay," I whispered shakily to myself before I took off.

Staying in a low, running crouch, I skirted along the edge of the building to the back of the barn, praying I'd be able to get that window open again.

Relief choked me when I saw it slightly ajar. Gloam must have opened it at some point in anticipation. Probably last night, before he'd returned to our room after carrying out his chores for Mary.

I crept underneath and stopped, listening. Mary was yammering away inside, complaining about Major Bratton being "a stubborn fool". I couldn't imagine how tense Gloam was in there. He was seconds away from freedom.

Panic froze me in place. He was relying on me. But how would I know when to say the words? Gloam said I would, *but how*? I didn't even know what they fucking meant.

I was going to fuck this up. I just knew it. I was going to miss the right time, or say the words wrong, or freeze up and forget them entirely. After all this. After everything.

I crouched there unmoving, huddled under the window, petrified that I was going to fail Gloam at the last hurdle.

Trying to control my frantic breaths, I looked down at the scrap of paper in my shaking hand and read the words again, over and over. Channelling my focus helped me to calm down, helped to slow my racing heart and chase away some of the overwhelming panic.

I had to do this. Gloam needed me. He needed me to get this right.

My legs were trembling when I slowly stretched up, just enough to peek inside. Mary had her back to the room as she stood in front of a big trough at the other end of the barn by the wide front doors. My throat convulsed when I saw what she was doing—picking out glistening, bloody chunks of raw meat from the trough and hand-feeding them to her shulc, which was cradled in her arms. Its horrifying mouth would stretch into a wide, perfect circle for her to drop the meat inside, and its head rattled as it happily chewed each mouthful.

I didn't want to know what was in that trough.

At least the shulc's frantic rattling would mask some noise. Gloam was standing closer to me, to the side of the huge central cage, his fingers clenched tight around the handle of his war hammer resting on the ground. His back was tense, and when I silently eased the window open wider, he stiffened completely.

He knew I was here.

I watched as he resituated his grip on his war hammer and slowly lifted it just an inch off the ground, before silently taking several steps back and to the right.

He was covering me, I realised. His big body would block out the sight of me crawling through the window if Mary happened to turn around.

Feeling a tiny spark of confidence, I carefully heaved myself up onto the window ledge, my arms shaking from how slowly I was moving. Panic streaked through me when my boots gave a muffled thud as I landed inside the barn, but neither Mary nor her pet seemed to notice. She was still talking, alternating between simpering at the shulc as she fed it and spouting off viciously about the military.

The sinewy teal monster in the nearest cage was watching me again, but it stayed silent.

I stayed in a crouch under the window, too scared to move. I wanted to cross the room to Gloam but didn't dare.

When did I say the words? How would I know?

Gloam's caged head rose. I knew he was staring at Mary. I watched him with wide eyes, waiting for him to reach up to that cage. To rip it off as a sign.

But he didn't. Instead, his fingers twitched on the handle of his war hammer. A tiny movement, but I *knew*. Somehow, I knew this was my signal. I knew, deep in my gut, that it was time.

I was never going to doubt tiny Mexican grandmothers ever again. Not that I was likely to come across many of those out here.

Mary jumped out of her skin when I stood up and started saying the words, my tongue tripping over them several times. She spun sharply, her eyes widening when she saw me, though I doubted she even remembered who I was. To her, I was no doubt just a strange raider who had appeared from nowhere in the middle of her precious monster collection.

The shulc was distracted, still chewing happily on a large hunk of meat and rattling away. It didn't seem to give a single fuck what was going on in the room.

"Wh-what are you—?" Mary squeaked in a shrill voice just as I said the last words.

"*Aedonimus ag ni Boetna.*"

Immediately, Gloam reached up with his free hand and ripped away the front of the cage, the back falling a split second later and both halves hitting the floor with a deafening thud.

He started to speak, his voice hoarse and rough from lack of use, but the words that flowed in a constant stream from his tongue were fluid and so alien that my skin broke out in goosebumps.

When he started to advance, Mary let out a little scream.

"Wha—How—"

She stumbled back, knocking into the trough. It tipped, spilling raw meat and thick, congealing blood everywhere. She slipped with a small cry, the shulc skittering out of her arms and frantically devouring all the meat that it could while its owner thudded to her back in a pool of blood, letting out a pained groan.

My heart felt like it was going to explode. Gloam was still speaking as he got closer to her, dragging his huge war hammer behind him.

“Stop,” Mary shrieked as he reached her, but she was too late.

He’d already stopped. He’d already finished speaking, and now he was looming over her where she lay in a spreading puddle of blood and viscera.

He lifted that war hammer high into the air with both hands, and then he brought it down directly on Mary’s head.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

My ears were ringing with shock in the ensuing silence.

"You… you killed her," I said like an idiot.

Gloam didn't need me to tell him that. Her brain matter and blood were splattered all over his boots and leather-clad legs.

I was trying desperately hard to keep my eyes off Mary's body, but even in my periphery I could see that her head was just… gone. There had already been blood everywhere from the knocked over trough, but the pool of it was growing rapidly again, seeping under the crack of the main doors and butting up against the edge of the nearest monster's cage. The beastie inside huddled back against the far wall fearfully.

Giving in to the morbid curiosity all humans possessed, I let my eyes flicker over her unmoving body on the floor. I was still standing all the way over on the other side of the room, so I couldn't see much, but the wiggly chunks of grey and shards of white scattered in the blood were enough to make my stomach roil.

I raised my trembling fist to my mouth when the shulc chittered with excitement and snuffled around Mary's gaping neck wound. It hoovered something into its mouth and crunched down.

"Oh shit."

My stomach spasmed and lurched, but I managed to get a hold of myself before I threw up. I ripped off my mask and dropped it on the floor, needing to suck in more air.

Gloam turned quickly. He let his war hammer slam to the floor, one of the wooden boards cracking under the impact, as he strode across the room toward me.

"I'm sorry," he rasped, his voice so deep and still hoarse. "I'm sorry you saw it. Please know, Adam, I needed to—It needed to be done."

I nodded, knowing my pupils were too big, my eyes too wide and unblinking. Gloam reached me and, after hesitating, gently cupped my shoulders. My hands automatically shot up to curl my fingers under his harness, holding on to him.

"I just… wasn't expecting it, I guess."

My voice was weirdly blank. It almost felt like someone else had just witnessed Mary's head get caved in and told me a second-hand account of it. Like I was detached.

Like I hadn't just watched her face explode under the momentous weight of Gloam's war hammer.

"I'm sorry," he whispered again, cradling the back of my head with both hands, fingers overlapping.

As the shock receded, I felt pretty embarrassed that I hadn't realised this was coming. That it hadn't been painfully obvious Gloam would've had to kill her. I assumed it was the final step to break her hold over him, but even if it wasn't… why *wouldn't* he have wanted to kill her? She had tortured him. Maimed him. Held him captive for years.

And then I realised—Mary wasn't important. Seeing her die wasn't important.

Because it was over. Gloam was free.

I blinked quickly and focused on his face. His beautiful, perfect, monstrous face as he gazed back down at me, his wideset eyes tight with worry—and fear. Did he think I was going to be scared of him now?

"Say something else," I whispered, my trembling lips curving into a tiny smile.

Gloam stilled, then slowly smiled back as he exhaled in relief. His fingers sifted through my hair.

"There is so much I want to say to you."

My smile turned into a shaky grin as I looked up at him, my fingers still wrapped around the leather straps of his harness.

"I'm ready to hear all of it."

He let out a soft rumble of amusement.

"My Adam." He brought his hands around to cup my face, big thumbs smoothing over my cheekbones. "I love you."

His voice was a low, deep rumble. Still hoarse and rusty, but so wonderful that I just wanted to close my eyes and listen to him talk forever. For what felt like the millionth time in just a few days, I started blubbering.

"I love you too," I rushed out, burying my face in his neck and wrapping my legs around his waist when he hefted me into his arms. "I love you so much. I can't believe we did it."

"*You* did it." He nuzzled my temple, his big body shuddering as he finally got to breathe in my scent. "And I can believe it. I knew you would."

I spluttered a watery laugh, lifting my head to look at him. “How could you have known that? Even *I* didn’t know that.”

Gloam grinned at me, showing off his short fangs and tusks.

“I just knew.”

Letting out a disbelieving grunt, I tightened my legs around his waist.

“I think you have far too much faith in me.”

“No.” Gloam pulled me even closer, until I had to let go of his harness and instead wrap my arms around his neck. “I have just the right amount of faith in you, Adam. I have no doubt about what you are capable of achieving.”

I sucked my lower lip into my mouth to try and hold back the weepy grin that threatened to emerge. I wanted to preen under his attention. I could see the pride in his eyes, directed solely at me, and for some reason it felt like I’d been waiting to see that look for my entire life.

“My little firebrand,” he rumbled, lifting a hand to smooth it over the back of my head. “You appeared and changed everything.”

I choked out a laugh.

“More like *you* appeared and changed everything. I was just living my boring, insular little life in the camp.”

He shook his head, those wide pupils flickering as he looked at me.

“Never boring. You are…” His breath shuddered out of him, and he suddenly yanked me tight to him, burying his face in my neck. “I am in your debt forever, Adam.”

“No.” I trailed my fingertips across the back of his skull and over the sweet, tapered tops of his ears. “No debts. To anybody.”

I gently tugged his head back so I could grin at him.

“You’re free now. Free of Mary and free of the cage.” I slid my hand around to brush my thumb over his grey lips. “Look at that pretty mouth.”

Gloam snorted, hefting me higher in his arms, the chained forearm supporting my backside.

“Nothing about me is pretty. Not like you.”

“Not true.” I leaned in and started kissing all over his face. His flat nose, those ridges in the centre, the corners of his wideset eyes. “Everything about you is perfect. Including that voice.”

I pulled back to grin at him again. I couldn’t stop smiling.

“I knew your voice would be so deep I’d feel it in the pit of my stomach,” I told him, then paused as I flushed. “I did also think you might

have been a cyclops under that cage, though, so…”

Gloam laughed, a deep, rich sound that warmed my insides.

“Are you disappointed?”

“Of course not.” I pressed the pads of my thumbs gently to the sockets of his eyes, where the bone curved inward under his cabled brow. “Two eyes is fine too.”

When he let out another chuckle, I shivered and rested my cheek against his shoulder, closing my eyes.

“Keep talking,” I mumbled, breathing in the scent of his skin. “You’ve had to listen to me talk shit for weeks without being able to tell me to shut up.”

“I hung on every word you said,” Gloam told me, his mouth moving against my hair. “There is no sound I enjoy more.”

God, this felt like a dream. Like I was actually dreaming, and in a minute I was going to wake up shivering in my sleeping bag on the hard, unforgiving ground in the Wastes, with Mary slamming open the RV door and barking orders at a caged, chained up Gloam.

My eyes popped open, and I stared at the strong, corded column of his throat. The two big holes on the underside of his jaw were almost healed, the skin pale and tender-looking.

I leaned in and pressed a soft kiss to the base of his throat, my stomach tightening when Gloam shuddered from the feel. Trailing my lips higher, I pressed kisses all the way up his neck to the lobe of his sweet ear.

I’d told him to keep talking, but there was something else we could do now.

My lips were already trembling as I kissed the hinge of his jaw, then his cheek. Gloam’s hands gripped me tighter, but otherwise he remained perfectly still. Waiting.

My nose brushed against the cabling on his cheek, and then my lips feathered over the corner of his mouth.

Before I could do anything else, Gloam turned his head and crushed his mouth to mine with a hoarse sound.

I shivered, going hot and cold all over as I clasped his face between my hands and moaned desperately into his mouth. Our lips opened and tongues met, gliding together with urgent wet sweeps as we kissed frantically.

My tongue grazed a fang, not hard enough to draw blood, making Gloam shudder. I could already taste metal, but it didn’t bother me in the

slightest. I loved it, because it was *him*.

His tongue was cabled, I realised with an intense shudder. Like the cables that wound under his skin. I mapped them with the tip of my tongue, finding three, evenly spaced, running down the length of muscle. I wondered what colour his tongue was. I'd only seen it briefly, coated in his thick brown blood with the rest of his mouth. Was it grey, like his skin? I wasn't willing to pull back to find out.

I let go of his face to wrap my arms entirely around his head, clutching him tighter to me. Our kiss grew messy and even more desperate. We couldn't stop. But I could feel myself slipping as Gloam grew distracted, and I tensed my thighs, tightening them even more around his hips so I could keep clinging on.

Gloam rumbled and took two steps to set me on the window ledge, grinning against my mouth when I let out a muffled yelp as I nearly fell straight back through the open window. His arms wrapped around me tight under my jacket, the links of his chain pressing into my skin through my shirt.

I didn't have time to be embarrassed, because his tongue was already pushing back into my mouth and brushing over mine. I completely melted against him as we kept kissing for long, long moments that I never wanted to end.

There was still so much to do. We needed to get the rings out of Gloam's back. The beasties had to be freed somehow. Mary's body was literally cooling on the other side of the barn, her pet shulc consuming her like it hadn't eaten in months.

But all of it could wait.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

In the end, we reluctantly broke apart when the wet, cracking sounds of the shulc eating Mary grew too distracting.

Gloam gently set me back on the ground, pressing a final kiss to my forehead. “Stay here. Don’t watch. I’ll get rid of… what’s left.”

I swallowed and nodded. The shulc had been eating loudly the entire time we were distracted with each other. I didn’t particularly want to see how much of Mary was still over there.

I turned and looked out the window, cringing when I heard a wet tearing sound coming from the other end of the barn. I listened to Gloam open the doors and fling something outside. The excited rattling of the shulc’s head got fainter as it bounded after whatever Gloam had distracted it with.

There was a rustle that sounded like trash bags, several thuds, then more rustling. I heard Gloam’s leather pants creak as he bent to heft Mary’s remains into his arms, before his bootsteps retreated out of the barn.

I was still facing the window, but I jumped when there came a faint splash from outside.

“Alright.” Gloam’s deep voice made me turn around as he stepped back into the barn a minute or so later. “I will clean this up.”

“No, I’ll do it.” I hurriedly picked up my mask and shoved it on, hoping it would mask the smell of blood and guts—and whatever else had been expelled from Mary’s body upon her death. I paled at the sight of the floor next to the barn doors, my legs turning to jelly.

“No, Adam, you—”

“I’m doing it, Gloam.” I looked around for cleaning supplies, feeling sick. “You’ve done enough for that asshole. You are *not* getting on your knees to clean up her blood.”

“Neither are you.”

“Yes. I am.” I forced myself to smile up at him, knowing he’d be able to see it in my eyes. “Let me do this for you. Please.”

Gloam took a step closer. “You’ve done enough.”

I huffed in exasperation, impatience chasing away the nausea. “We could stand here arguing about this all day, which is really *not* what I was hoping we’d do as soon as you got your voice back.”

He stilled, then chuckled.

“Alright, firebrand.” His eyes were soft when he looked at me and murmured, “Thank you.”

“I’m happy to help.” I forced my tone to be cheerful, as though I wasn’t about to mop up the blood and brains of the woman who’d held my beastie captive. “Now where’s the cleaning stuff?”

“In the room with Seraph.” Gloam looked at the heavy, closed door at the side of the barn. “I’ll get it.”

So Seraph *was* the monster with the many eyes. He hadn’t made a peep this whole time, but I wondered if the door was soundproofed to block out his furious screaming. I couldn’t help but feel a little sad for him, even though he *was* terrifying. I wondered why Mary had shoved him away in a backroom with the cleaning supplies instead of having him out here with the rest of her collection.

When Gloam opened the door and went inside, leaving it ajar, I couldn’t hear anything. No roars or pounding on the glass of his cage. Maybe he was just used to Gloam’s presence, so it didn’t trigger him like mine had.

In fact, none of the monsters had made any noise as they’d watched Gloam kill Mary. I’d been able to block them out, but now that I was alone in here with Gloam in the other room, I could feel the weight of all their eyes on the back of my neck.

I looked over my shoulder at the vivid teal monster near the window. It was watching me. It still looked sad, but there was a keen awareness in its eyes. Maybe it thought we were going to leave them all locked up here, and they’d be left to waste away entirely now that their captor was dead.

I flushed at the sudden realisation that all these beasties had witnessed our first kiss. Our first several kisses. The frantic, desperate way we’d gone at each other, unwilling to break apart even to breathe.

“Sorry for the show, guys,” I said with a nervous chuckle, then jumped when Gloam came back into the room a second later carrying a basket of cleaning supplies. My face heated with embarrassment as I reached for them, hoping he hadn’t heard. “Thanks.”

After taking the basket, I walked unsteadily to the big puddle of blood and gore on the floor. My insides were jittery as I knelt at the edge of it, having no idea where to start. The trough was already gone. Gloam must have taken it when he took out Mary. I didn’t know if he’d gathered up all the bigger chunks of meat as well, or if the shulc had eaten them all.

I forced out a hard breath and started sifting through the cleaning supplies, trying to find something that would work. “I’ll clean this up, then we’ll go back to the house and take the rings out of your back, yeah?”

I was still scared to do it—terrified of hurting Gloam—but felt confident that we could get over this final hurdle. Honestly, right now, I felt like I could achieve anything. I was about to mop up Mary’s brains, for fuck’s sake.

“Not yet, my love.”

I looked up quickly with a frown. “Why not?”

Gloam gestured at the silent beasties watching us from their cages. “I want to free them first. I may not be able to move for a while after we take the rings out. It’s not fair to make them wait any longer.”

“What?” I froze, staring up at him. “You may not be able to move?”

He gave a small shrug. “There is a chance. They are behind my spine.”

The shuddery breath left me in a rush, and my hands started to shake. My voice was small when I said, “I don’t think I can do it.”

“Adam.” Gloam crouched beside me, his leather pants creaking with the movement. He reached over and palmed my cheek. “You don’t have to if you don’t want to, but I know you can. I trust you completely.”

He eased the big bottle of bleach from my clenching grip and set it on the floor, then raised my hands to his mouth.

“You were so careful before,” he said, kissing the backs of my gloved hands. “These gentle, clever hands.”

He kissed them again then grinned up at me, and my breath caught from how beautiful he was. “I have felt them on every part of me. I know just how clever they are.”

I exhaled a shaky breath, my face going pink. “Don’t make me get a boner while I’m kneeling in blood. Who knows what kind of kink could spawn from that.”

He laughed and straightened back up, dropping a kiss on the top of my head on the way. Before I could start cleaning, a sickening, wet crunch made my shoulders flinch. When that eerie rattling sounded just after, I turned my head and stared at the shulc beyond the barn doors.

Gloam followed my gaze.

“Is it… going to die without her?” I asked, watching the shulc swallow the last of an arm. Mary’s arm. Her pink-tipped nails were the final things to get sucked into the creature’s lamprey mouth.

“No.” Gloam’s hand brushed over the top of my head. “It will be fine. It has already forgotten her. It was never meant to be domesticated. It will go back to being wild.”

I didn’t particularly like the thought of that thing roaming the Wastes, ripping off people’s hands and arms, but it wasn’t its fault that Mary had kept it with her.

Maybe it would find that nest of little hand monsters outside the wall and eat them. I’d be okay with that.

I looked away and snapped open a trash bag, then grabbed a huge roll of blue paper to start mopping everything up.

“Where… where did you put her?” I asked quietly, keeping my head down as I started scooping up brain matter and shards of skull. My stomach lurched, but I pressed my lips tight together behind my mask.

Gloam was quiet for a moment.

“The lake,” he eventually said. “Weighed down with the trough.”

I nodded, trying to concentrate on getting this done as quickly as possible. As soon as all the lumps and most of the congealing blood were gathered up in a bulging mound of paper towels and stuffed in the trash bag, I grabbed the bleach and unscrewed the cap.

“I will start freeing them.”

I looked up quickly, my eyes darting to the closed door at the side of the room. “Is… Are any of them dangerous?”

Gloam crouched again to cup my chin. He nodded. “Some of them, yes. I will only free the placid ones for now. I would never risk you, Adam.”

I gave him a wobbly smile. “I know you wouldn’t.”

He watched me for a moment longer, cabled brows pinched just a little.

“I love you,” he told me, and my insides turned to goo. “This will take a while. I will have to take each of them quite far from the house. Why don’t you go and rest?” He gestured at the blood. “I will do this.”

I shook my head stubbornly. “I’m nearly done. I don’t mind. I want to help.”

As he reluctantly stood back up, I quickly added, “I love you too.”

I didn’t think I’d ever get tired of hearing him say that. I was pretty sure I’d never get tired of hearing him say anything. He could have read Mary’s journals out loud to me and I knew I still would’ve wanted to curl up naked with him and listen to that rumbling voice in my ear.

The thought of doing just that—minus the Mary's journals part—drove me to start scrubbing up all the blood. I was probably ruining the floorboards by using bleach on them, but I literally couldn't have cared less.

I blocked everything else out and focused on removing the last stain of Mary from our lives.

Gloam started with the beastie I'd come to think of as the kaleidoscope bird, even though it didn't look anything like the birds from this world. Shit, *Aury* looked more like a bird than that creature technically did.

As I cleaned, he heaved the cage away from the wall and started dragging it outside.

"Wait."

Gloam stopped, peering over his shoulder at me. The beastie's eyes narrowed behind him, as if it thought I was going to tell him not to free it.

God, just how intelligent were these monsters? None of them had spoken. Some of them appeared more animal-like than others, but that kaleidoscope bird was giving me a look that screamed, *'I swear to god, puny human…'*

"How are you going to get them open?" I asked, scrambling to my feet. I made sure to keep my hands out in front of me. My gloves were coated.

"I can get them open," was all he said, and I flushed.

"Right. Of course. Monster strength."

He gave me a soft smile. "I'll be back soon, love."

"Be careful!" I called after him as he shoved the cage out of the barn.

As I got back on my knees and continued scrubbing the floor, I could sense the other beasties becoming more alert in their cages, probably wondering what the hell Gloam was going to do with the kaleidoscope bird one. Maybe they thought they were being taken outside for slaughter.

My chest panged at the thought.

"You're all getting free, guys," I said cheerfully, just in case any of them *could* understand me. "I know Mary—the, uh, dead woman—made Gloam capture you, but he was under her control. He didn't want to do it. He's going to free all of you."

I hesitantly looked back at the teal beastie in the farthest cage. It was staring at me with its big eyes, its head cocked. I shot it a tentative smile

before turning back around.

“I’m sorry you were kept like this. And I’m sorry for… for whatever Mary made you do to each other. She was evil. Not all humans are like that, I promise.”

None of them answered me, but I hadn’t expected them to anyway.

Blood was freaking hard to get out of wood, I quickly realised as Gloam moved around behind me, dragging cage after cage out of the barn. I was sweating as I scrubbed, trying to keep my brain busy so I didn’t think about what I’d have to do as soon as the beasties were set free. My shoulders flinched every time I heard Gloam’s chain clinking as he moved.

When the weight of monstrous eyes on my back had lessened considerably, I finally looked up and realised most of the cages were empty. A sound from behind me made me look back, and when I saw Gloam heaving forward the cage with the teal beastie, I scrambled to my feet.

“Wait.”

Gloam stopped, looking over at me as I pulled off my gloves and mask. I walked over to the cage and smiled nervously at the beastie inside, who was already watching me with its big, solid greeny-blue eyes. Its head cocked, and after a second its small mouth quirked into an unnatural-looking smile of its own, like it was copying me.

“Bye,” I said quietly, but I realised that I couldn’t see anything resembling ears on the sides of its head. There were raised patterns over its skin, but no protrusions or holes.

It had watched me closely as I spoke, and I saw its small mouth purse as though it was trying to mimic what mine had done as I said the word.

I jumped a little when it raised a hand, but all it did was press it to the glass in front of me. Hesitantly, I did the same. I could have sworn that for a split-second, I saw its three fingers morph into five, like mine, its skin shifting to match my tone before it dropped its hand.

I stepped back to let Gloam push the cage out.

“A pylk,” he said to me with a small smile as he passed. “Gentle creatures. And rare.”

The pylk was kneeling in its cage, watching me as Gloam pushed it out of the barn. I saw it raise its hand again before it disappeared from sight.

Once they were gone, I became very aware of the fact that only the beasties Gloam had deemed too volatile to let free just yet were left in the barn. I could feel their eyes on me. Ducking my head, I walked back to the

wet stain on the floor and finished scrubbing up the mess. We could have just left it, but we figured it was safer to leave no clues about what had happened to Mary when the military next came to visit. Although, the empty cages would probably be their main concern.

Whatever. We'd be long gone by the time they came back. And they didn't even know Gloam existed, so they wouldn't be looking for him.

"That's the last of them for now."

Gloam walked back into the barn as I finished shoving all the cleaning supplies into the basket. He hadn't been gone long at all, which meant he wasn't worried about the pylk and had set it free just beyond the property grounds.

Five of the cages were still occupied, including the one with the white and purple, cat-like beastie inside. It was pacing in there in tight circles, its head dipping every few seconds in an anxious tic. My lips pulled down at the sight.

Exhaling, I stood up and shot Gloam a nervous smile as he approached, knowing what was coming next.

"Good. Are you—are you ready to go inside and get the rings out?"

His cabled brow furrowed with concern as he cupped my face. "Are *you* ready, Adam?"

"No." I laughed nervously. "But I want to do it. You've waited long enough."

He continued to watch me closely.

"We can leave them in," he said softly, his big thumb stroking my jaw. "I don't mind."

"No. No way." I reached up and clung onto his harness. "They're coming out. I can do it. I want to do this for you."

He smiled a little and leaned down to kiss me. "My brave firebrand."

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Removing the rings from Gloam's back was awful.

First, I had to cut away most of the chain. It slithered free from his arm and coiled on the floor of the bedroom.

I could tell that the vibrations alone were incredibly uncomfortable as I cut sections from each of the three rings, like I had with the two going through his jaw. There was no other way to get them out. I could see the bubbled lines where the two halves of them had been welded after being inserted, like the ones in the cage.

Blood was already trickling from all the wounds by the time I set the angle grinder down with shaking hands. I pressed a kiss to the back of Gloam's head before I continued, wanting to give him a break.

Before the worst bit.

"Do you want to wait a while?" I whispered against the smooth dome of his skull, my lips pressed to the black stain there.

He shook his head. "Do it now, Adam. There's no point delaying it."

He was straddling the wooden desk chair from the other room, having snapped the arms off after I went and retrieved it. His big hands gripped the backrest tight, but he took a deep breath and relaxed his back muscles in preparation.

I'd already put my gloves back on after thoroughly cleaning them, because I was pretty sure I'd need the extra grip from the leather. The thought made me want to throw up.

Taking a deep breath, I slowly gripped the first ring.

Gloam's back twitched. My eyes already watering, I tried to gently pull.

It didn't move an inch.

"You'll need to use more force, love," Gloam said, his voice tight.

Sinking my teeth into my lower lip to stop any whimpers escaping, I tightened my grip and carefully tugged again. When it still didn't move, even as more blood bubbled and slid down Gloam's back, I pulled with more force.

It still wouldn't fucking move.

"It's not coming out." My voice was wobbly with emotion that I tried desperately hard to contain.

“I know you don’t want to hurt me, Adam, but you have to.” Gloam tried to gentle his voice, but he couldn’t mask the tense edge to it. “They have been in there a long time. You are going to need to use all your strength.”

“Fuck,” I blubbered, turning my head to swipe my eyes against my sleeve. I took a shaky breath. Then another. “Okay. Okay.”

Gritting my teeth, I pulled hard on the ring and almost let go when Gloam gasped in pain. There was a wet, sucking sound followed by a heavy gush of blood. The metal ring moved less than an inch.

“It’s not coming out,” I said again in utter anguish, my breaths coming too fast.

Gloam let out a long exhale, visibly trying to relax his back muscles again. “Adam, if I could do this myself and spare you this, I would. But I can’t, my love. You can do it. It’s coming. Just pull as hard as you can.”

I let out a weak sob and pulled, my arms shaking with the effort. Gloam grunted from the pain, the wooden backrest of the chair splintering under his fingers. The ring slid around less than half an inch, coated in blood, before I felt it catch and grind against something deep under Gloam’s skin. He cried out in agony, body shuddering.

I immediately let go. “F-fuck, I’m sorry. I’m sorry. This isn’t working.”

I stripped off my gloves and swiped at my streaming eyes, trying to calm down and think rationally. “I can’t—My gloves are slipping from the b-blood. I can’t get a good enough grip. I—I need something.”

Gloam’s breath trembled out, his voice tight when he asked, “Is there anything that will help?”

I tried to think. Tried not to let the clawing panic overwhelm me. “Um… um… I… M-maybe—maybe pliers? I c-could go look in the garage.”

He nodded once, head hanging low as his back heaved. Each breath seemed to cause him even more pain. “Good idea, love. Go and look.”

“Okay. Okay.” I wanted to press a kiss to the back of his head but didn’t dare. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

I sprinted my way to the garage, knowing Gloam was sitting in that room waiting for me to do this for him. No one else could. It had to be me.

I found a wrench and a pair of pliers in the garage, nearly dropping both as I ran back up the stairs and into the bedroom.

I put the gloves back on and wiped them dry on an old towel before I stuffed the edge of another into the back of Gloam’s pants. There was

already a lot of blood, and I knew more was going to come.

Picking up the pliers with shaking hands, I gently clamped the teeth around the ring. Gloam's breath caught, making my eyes well up again.

"I'm sorry," I whispered as I started to pull.

The ring slowly started sliding out easier now that I had a stronger grip. Blood gushed from the holes in Gloam's back in a constant stream, pouring down. The white towel was already soaking through, turning a rich dark brown. I could hear the grate of the metal scraping against the backs of his rib cage as I twisted, my chest tightening with misery when he cried out.

With a sudden wet suck that made my stomach lurch, the ring popped free in a torrent of blood. I nearly stumbled back, the pliers jerking toward me as the tension I'd been fighting suddenly vanished.

Gloam gave a low groan, his back trembling.

I was panting hard, sweating despite feeling cold and clammy all over. I quickly dropped the ring from the pliers' teeth and stared at it, coated in blood and tiny bits of skin on the floor.

I had to do that two more times. Gloam had to go through that two more times.

When I looked at his back, I couldn't contain the weak sob that left me. The holes were big and raw, pouring with blood and jagged at the edges where the ring had ripped free from the skin that had healed around it.

Gloam exhaled a trembling breath. "Are you alright, Adam?"

I pursed my lips to stop another sob escaping. He had gaping wounds in his back, and he was asking me if *I* was alright.

"I'm fine." My voice wobbled.

"Are you ready to do the next one?"

My breath hitched as I nodded, even though he couldn't see. He probably wanted to get this over with as swiftly as possible, so I forced myself to gently clamp the pliers around the second ring.

I was glad I'd started with the bottom one, because there was so much blood that it would have been impossible to get a grip on the other two with how much would have coated them. Gloam cried out again as I pulled out the second ring. I moved on to the third without pausing, determined to get it over with as quickly as possible for his sake. When the last one popped free with the pliers, his entire body let out a violent shudder as he moaned hoarsely.

The pliers clattered to the floor as I stripped off my gloves and grabbed a clean towel to press it gently to the wounds, trying to staunch some of the blood. The bottom holes had already stopped bleeding, thank god.

"They're out." I kissed the back of Gloam's head again and again.

He groaned in utter relief and straightened, all the muscles in his back flexing, causing more blood to gush from the open wounds.

"Don't move too much," I blurted. "We need to get you over to the bed."

I moved to his side to help him up from the chair, but Gloam caught my hand as he looked up at me, eyes bright and shiny with gratitude.

"Thank you," he murmured, lifting my hand to his mouth to kiss my knuckles, before turning it to drop another kiss to my palm. "Thank you, Adam."

I shook my head, swiping quickly at my cheeks. "You don't need to thank me."

He was unsteady when I helped him up out of the chair. He may have healed fast, but he had still lost a lot of blood. He settled on his side on the bed, and I sat behind him with a towel gently pressed to the wounds until the last ones stopped bleeding.

I knew I had to clean up the room, but it could wait. I laid down beside him so we faced one another, and the tight knot of worry in my chest loosened a little when I saw how much softer his face looked. I hadn't even realised the tension he was carrying had been visible on his features, but now that it was gone, he looked younger.

"Do you feel better?" I whispered, trailing my fingertips back and forth over a cabled ridge on his chest. "Now they're gone?"

Gloam gave me a soft smile.

"Yes." He lifted my hand and kissed my palm. "You are my Androcles."

I grinned shakily even as I asked, "Who?"

He chuckled. "The slave who pulled the thorn from the lion's paw."

"Oh." I had only vague recollections of the story, but I still flushed with pleasure.

"And like the lion,"—Gloam reached out and cupped my chin—"I will be loyal to you always, my Adam. I will never leave your side."

Unable to stop myself, I moved closer and tilted my chin until I could kiss him. The kiss was soft and slow, just a gentle press of lips at first until our tongues wound together lazily.

“I can’t believe it’s all over,” I whispered when we finally pulled apart. “All of it. The cage is gone. The rings are gone. *Mary’s* gone.”

“Thanks to you,” Gloam rumbled, cupping my cheek and stroking the corner of my mouth.

“That last part is entirely down to you. There’s no way I’d be able to lift that war hammer.”

I’d tried one night when we were still out in the Wastes, but it had felt like that thing was rooted deep into the ground. I couldn’t lift it even an inch.

Gloam laughed, but it cut off with a pained hiss as the muscles in his back shifted.

“I still don’t really understand how it worked,” I whispered. “I thought that maybe you’d have to try and stop me getting the cage off. That the compulsion would force you to.”

“It should have,” he mused. “But I think the fact that you were doing it solely for me—not to hurt her—helped. It was the loophole we needed.”

He covered my hand resting between us and linked our fingers. “I am just lucky that you are so sweetly pure. Even if you are my firebrand.”

I chuckled, my face getting hot. “I feel so stupid for not realising you’d have to kill her.”

“How could you have? I couldn’t tell you what I had to do to end it. You couldn’t have known.”

“How did it work? With me saying something first?”

“As soon as you said my true name, the hold she had started breaking. Enough for me to remove the cage and say the rest.”

My breath caught as I pulled my hand free to cup his beautiful face. “Which… which part was your name?”

He gazed back at me, his wide pupils flickering. “Aedonimus ag ni Boetna.”

“Aedonimus,” I echoed, my heart squeezing when he gave a soft smile and turned his face to nuzzle my palm.

“What did it mean?” I whispered, stroking my fingertips over the cabling on his cheek. “What I said?”

“It means ‘I return your name to you, Aedonimus ag ni Boetna’.”

The way he said his own name was weirdly hot. Deep and rich, rolling off his tongue. I shivered.

“What about what you said?”

His lips quirked into a little smile. “Some old, archaic words that have almost never been used. But we are all taught them from a very young age. Just in case.”

“Thank god.” I nestled closer to him, breathing in the faintly metallic scent of his throat. “Would it have worked if you’d just killed her? I know you couldn’t before saying the words because of the compulsion, but just hypothetically.”

“In this case, no, because the control over me had been transferred from another. If Mary had died without me breaking it, it would have just transferred back to the Herald.”

He kissed the top of my head. “So I am very lucky that you are not a bloodthirsty little firebrand.”

I balked at the idea of killing anyone. “No thirst for blood here. I’ll leave you to do any skull-bashing in the future. You were good at it.”

Gloam chuckled. “Thank you, I think.”

He looked at me, his gaze intense yet still soft. “I will protect you from all harm, my love.”

Pleasure warmed me. I buried deeper into his chest, resisting the urge to wrap my arm around his back in case it hurt his wounds.

“If Mary had been the first to control me, killing her would have been enough,” he said, sifting long fingers through my hair. “Although, any smart being would ensure that their first order was ‘never hurt me’, which would have made it impossible to kill them. Luckily, Mary and the Herald aren’t very smart. Evidently, neither are my brothers.”

He let out a humourless snort, then brushed his lips over my forehead. “And they never expected you.”

“So that was our loophole?” I asked sleepily, rubbing my nose against the base of his throat.

“Yes. She was in no true danger until you had already finished saying the words that started breaking her hold. And then, the only danger was me.”

“Clever beastie.” I kissed his skin. “How does your back feel?”

“Better,” he murmured, tilting his head to nuzzle my hair. “I should go and free the rest of them.”

“No. No way.” I lifted my head to glare at him. “You’re resting first. Until you’re completely healed.”

He chuckled, cupping my chin and kissing me once.

“Alright, firebrand,” he said. “We’ll rest first.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

I made Gloam rest for two days, until the wounds on his back were pale but healed, scar tissue already forming.

While he stayed in our room reading, I explored the rest of the mansion, which was how I found the huge master bathroom by Mary's study with a gigantic sunken tub.

As soon as I felt that it was safe for Gloam to move around, I dragged him in there.

"Jesus Christ, this is in the top three best things I've ever felt," I groaned in bliss as I sank deeper into the hot water, pulling Gloam's big body tighter against me.

He was sitting in the cradle of my legs in the bath, bubbles floating around us from Mary's expensive products, with his head resting on my shoulder. I wrapped my legs around his thick thighs like I was trying to pin him, my already half-hard cock jerking from the slippery feel of his skin.

"Mmm." I leaned my head down to kiss his neck. "Your ass is number one, by the way. In case you were wondering."

He chuckled, smoothing a big hand down my shin beneath the water. "I am pleased to hear it, my firebrand."

Turning his head to nuzzle my ear, he murmured, "And your cock is exquisite. In case you were wondering. Just like the rest of you."

I chuckled sheepishly, the cock in question bucking from his words.

We hadn't had sex again yet, because I'd been too worried about Gloam straining his back while he was still healing. But now that he was up, and I could see his big, beautiful, naked body moving gracefully again, I was already planning on jumping him the moment we were out of the tub. He wasn't aware of it yet, but I knew he'd be as eager as I was. I could see the blurry grey outline of his hard cock bobbing in the water between his legs, and it made my mouth water.

Gloam shifted against me, turning his head until it was tucked into the space beneath my jaw. His nubby horn pressed against my earlobe, and I felt the sweep of his lashes when he shut his eyes.

"Finding you has made everything worth it," he murmured, making my breath catch in my throat. "I would go through it all a thousand times again

to have you, Adam."

Fuck. I bit my lip as my eyes grew hot.

Burying my face in his neck, I could do nothing more than whisper, "Me too."

Gloam lifted my hand from the water and kissed my palm, then the sensitive inner skin of my wrist. "I love you."

"I love you too." My voice was muffled and shaky against his neck.

This hadn't been what I'd set out to do. I'd been attracted to him in some way from the beginning, but that hadn't been the driving force behind my desperate desire to help him. And I knew with certainty that even if my attraction had bloomed slowly, or his appearance had been too monstrous for me to ever truly desire, I still would have loved him.

How could I not?

"I still can't believe we did it," I mumbled against his neck, tightening my legs to pull him closer.

Gloam chuckled, kissing my palm again before placing it on his big chest and covering it with his own. His strong heart thudded in a steady rhythm beneath my hand.

"You have said that several times already, my love. Believe it. You did it."

"I know, but I still can't. It feels like it's been years since we set out from the camp."

Something in me had changed, I knew. I'd been hiding away in the camp, not really any different to how I'd been when I first set foot in it at seventeen. I hadn't been miserable. I'd been fine. Happy with what I had—still just grateful to have a place out here, and people to be with.

Now it all seemed so muted and trivial without him. Now, it felt like there'd always been an empty space beside me that I had just been waiting for him to fill.

"I wish you'd never been through any of it," I whispered into his neck, feeling him turn his face and nuzzle my cheek. His sweet little horn brushed against my wet hair. "But at least I got to meet you."

Gloam rumbled, kissing my cheek. "Not just meet me, little firebrand. You're stuck with me now. You are my everything."

I flushed with unbridled joy. I'd never really been anyone's anything before, aside from Ghost's goofy best friend and the guy who was alright at fixing stuff.

“Is your bedroom at the camp large enough for a big, beastly aytorin?” Gloam asked with a smile in his voice.

I snorted. “You’re, like, the most refined person I know. Not beastly at all. And yes, there’s room. If it’s too small for you, I’ll knock down a wall and we can double up.”

He chuckled. “Won’t the other raiders have something to say about that?”

“As if I give a shit what they think.” I kissed his neck, all the way up to his sweet ear, my stomach warming when Gloam sighed with pleasure. “I’ll give you anything you want. If that’s a bigger room, I’ll make it happen.”

I pictured Gloam’s big body taking up all the space in my room, and a grin stretched my mouth as I pressed it to his thick shoulder. I couldn’t wait to have him there—to have him beside me in my bed, where I’d only ever slept alone.

I’d never be alone again, and neither would he.

I tried to imagine Gloam in the camp. Spending time with Ghost and Aury. Helping me with any odd jobs that required heavy lifting—because it would be effortless for him. I could picture him chuckling as he watched Lilac try and lift his giant war hammer, determined to not be bested by any weapon.

Cat’s room had lots of books. *So* many books. Maybe he could find out more about this world that way. That was what he’d come here to do with his brothers—to learn.

A sudden bout of unease made me want to squirm.

“Do you definitely want to go back to the camp?” I asked, keeping my nose and mouth against his shoulder as I stared at the water. “Don’t you want to… Did you want to go see your brothers?”

Gloam stiffened against me. “No. They are a lost cause. And it’s not safe for me to go back there. They would do the same thing to me again.”

Pure terror gripped my insides, making me cling to him harder.

“I’m sorry they did it to you,” I mumbled into his skin.

He exhaled and smoothed his hand down my arm. “Thank you, Adam.”

He was silent for a long moment, and his voice was unsteady when he spoke again.

“I miss them. Not what they have become, but what they were. Who they were when we were young.” He tilted his head against my shoulder to look at me. “Does that make me weak?”

“No.” I kissed the corner of his mouth. “It doesn’t.”

I hesitated, not sure if he wanted to talk about them.

“What… what are their names? Not their true names,” I added quickly. “I don’t want to know that.”

“I know you would never use them for your own gain, my love.” Gloam stroked my leg. “There is Metelimus. He goes by Dain. And Neminos, who goes by Tide.”

He sighed. “Metelimus was the first to get drawn in by the Herald. He pulled Neminos into their web not long after.”

I squeezed him. “But you refused.”

“Yes.” His voice was soft. Water sloshed over the side of the tub as he extricated himself from my hold and turned to face me with a smile. “But I don’t want to wallow in the past. Not when we are here together now.”

Flushing with pleasure, I twined my arms around his neck and kissed him.

“What about your… the city? The others?” I swallowed. “Don’t you want to go back?”

Gloam gave me an intense look. “No. I meant it when I said you are stuck with me, Adam. The pain of being without you would be worse than any other I’ve experienced. I felt it for less than a day when the Herald took you. I never want to feel it again.”

“So you… you want to come back to the camp with me?” My voice was embarrassingly hopeful. “Live there with me?”

“I go where you go, Adam,” he said before kissing me again.

I tried to push away the doubt that I would be enough for him as I kissed him back. I tried to believe his words, because he had only ever been honest with me, even when there were things he couldn’t say.

He’d never called me stupid. Or an idiot. He’d never, ever made me feel small or less just because he was incredibly intelligent and strong and just… more.

He made me feel like I could be more.

When we finally pulled apart long minutes later, Gloam cupped my cheek with a wet hand and smiled down at me.

“I am your lion,” he said, his deep voice low, his words just for me. “Loyal to you until the end.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

We got out of the bath only when the water had cooled past the point of comfortable and my fingertips were so pruny they looked like raisins.

“I went exploring, but I didn’t look behind that closed door at the end of this hall,” I told Gloam as we dried off and got dressed. “I figured it was Mary’s room.”

“Yes. The room opposite her study was her bedroom.”

I sat down on the closed toilet to pull on my boots, my head lifting every few seconds so I could watch Gloam tug his pants up over his firm, rounded backside. My cock was still half-hard—it hadn’t deflated the entire time we’d been in the bath—and I could see that Gloam was in the same predicament. He carefully tucked his thick erection into his pants before lacing them.

My stomach lurched with want.

Determined to get to a bed with him, I grabbed his hand and pulled him out of the bathroom the moment his boots were on.

Gloam laughed, but it sounded strained. When I tried to drag him down the hall back toward the west wing, he stopped and turned me.

“Adam.” His voice was rough with lust, and my breath caught when he picked me up and pressed my back into the wall. “I want you so much, my firebrand.”

I let out a trembling exhale. “I want you too.”

“I would die for you, do you know that?” His eyes glimmered with emotion, those long pupils flickering. “I hate what you have gone through for me. I hate that you walked away from everything you knew for me. But I am weak, because I cannot bring myself to regret any of it.”

He kissed me once, gently. “You are my greatest weakness—not my true name, or any compulsion I can be put under. But you are the one I gladly carry. I would do anything for you, just as you have done everything for me.”

My chin trembled, so I tried to force back the urge to cry by kissing him hard, wrapping my arms around his neck.

“You’re not my weakness,” I mumbled shakily against his mouth. “You make me better.”

Gloam made a soft, hoarse sound in this throat.

“You are right yet again.” He pulled back to give me a small smile. “You don’t make me weaker, my clever firebrand.”

He kissed me again, moaning low into my mouth when our lips opened and our tongues met in a fiery, wet clash. The taste of him flooded me, sweet and metallic, the cables on his tongue and the little points of his fangs and tusks reminding me just how inhuman he was.

But he was perfect, just as he was. Gloam could never have been human. There was too much of him to ever fit into a human body—not just his size, but his entire being. He was *more*, but he didn’t make me feel lesser. His words and actions made me feel the biggest I ever had. Like I could do anything.

And right now, all I wanted to do was get as close to him as I possibly could. I sucked on his cabled tongue, my cock stiffening rapidly when he shuddered against me and moaned into my mouth. Our kiss grew messier and more frantic as the desperation for one another eclipsed everything else.

By the time Gloam finally pulled away to trail kisses along my jaw and down my neck, I was trembling. My dick had leaked so much pre-cum that the hot, damp friction of my underwear against the sensitive tip was making me shudder.

I rolled my head to the side against the wall, giving him more room as he trailed his tongue down my neck. When I half-opened my dazed eyes, my gaze fell on the closed door at the end of the hall.

A spark of fire lit in my gut. I shifted against Gloam until he carefully set me on my feet, needing to be completely naked with him *right now*.

“Let’s go fuck in Mary’s room.” I grabbed his hand, ignoring the surprised sound he made, and pulled him toward the closed door.

When I opened it, my lip curled at the opulence. The walls were papered with a gold-hued, lightly embossed pattern. There was a huge four-poster bed in the centre of the room, situated between two crystal clear windows with heavy, deep burgundy drapes that were pulled back to let the light stream in.

I eyed the bed for a moment, suddenly doubting my decision. It looked comfortable and decadent, with its heavy, billion-thread-count sheets, and big enough for Gloam to fully stretch out, but… Mary had slept in that thing. Nope. No, thank you.

I still wanted to fuck in here though. As one final, gigantic middle finger to the woman who had enslaved and tortured Gloam.

I looked around and saw a big dresser beside a floor-length freestanding mirror. Tugging Gloam over, I shoved all of Mary's stupid shit off its surface, feeling immensely satisfied when a gold embossed lamp and delicate glass ornament of a stag shattered on the wooden floor.

I could just about hop up to sit on top, and I grinned wickedly at Gloam as I pulled him into the cradle of my spread legs with a finger hooked under his leather harness.

He smiled around his short fangs and slid big hands up my thighs, letting out a low, hoarse chuckle. "My little firebrand."

We kissed again, unable to pull away for long moments, our tongues gliding together. Gloam pressed closer, his hard stomach putting delicious pressure against my aching dick, and soon I was panting into his mouth.

Without saying a word, we pulled apart to hurriedly start stripping. Gloam helped me undress, frantically pulling down my pants and underwear while I whipped off my shirt. He knelt to tug my boots and socks off, then yanked the rest over my feet and away.

I licked my lips when he straightened, long fingers already fumbling with the lacing on the front of his pants. He shoved them down, discarding his boots on the way, and then his big, strong body with its deep grey, mottled skin and all those fascinating ridges was completely bare to my gaze.

"Fuck, you're so hot," I croaked, already running frantic hands over his rounded shoulders and down his chest as he moved closer again. Gloam rumbled with pleasure when I tweaked his nipples, but my greedy hands were already skimming down his hard stomach to grab his fat cock.

He shuddered. "*Adam*."

God, I fucking *loved* hearing him say my name out loud. I lunged up to kiss him again, moaning into his mouth as my hands mapped out his cock, fingertips skimming over the cabled ridges before I wrapped both around that mid-shaft swell and squeezed.

I wanted this big, beautiful thing inside me. It was going to hurt, but I didn't care. I could only imagine how full I'd feel, and I shuddered at the thought of being impaled on Gloam's thick cock.

His big body trembled between my legs, hands roaming restlessly over my thighs and hips before sliding around to my back as he broke the kiss

and panted into my neck while I stroked him off.

I nuzzled his cheek before sucking on the lobe of his perfect ear.

“Do you want to fuck me with this, Gloam?” I murmured, squeezing that big bulge again to get my point across.

His breath caught, long fingers clenching on my hips.

His voice was a deep rasp when he spoke. “Yes.”

I finally let go to slide my hands up his arms, over those bulging biceps to his wide shoulders. Gloam pressed even closer, and we both groaned when our cocks slid together between our bodies. Our mouths met again, moving feverishly together.

It honestly felt like I wouldn’t be able to go a few minutes without kissing him for at least a week. Maybe two weeks. Maybe we should have just holed up here until we were a little less frantic for each other.

The problem was, our desperate desire to kiss constantly was stopping us from getting anywhere. My cock was so hard it hurt, and when the leaking tip brushed against Gloam’s, I shuddered and pulled away.

“We need to find lube.” My voice was hoarse already, and I could feel the crazed gleam in my eyes as I looked around the ridiculous bedroom. My wild gaze homed in on the nightstand that had a romance novel and an old, dusty glass of water resting on top. I panted as I stared, indecision warring.

In the end, I looked away to find something else. If Mary had lube in there, I did not want to know, and I did not want to touch it.

My eyes fell to the pile of broken stuff I’d swept dramatically off the dresser.

“There—what’s that?” I pointed at a heavy glass bottle that had managed to remain intact in the fall. It was half-filled with a gleaming, slightly viscous gold liquid.

Gloam pulled away and bent down to retrieve it.

“Be careful, there’s broken glass,” I blurted, feeling bad for my little destructive episode, but only because I didn’t want Gloam to get cut.

He returned to his spot between my legs, holding the bottle in one hand. The other found my thigh and slid up. I shuddered when his thumb brushed over the side of my balls.

“Body oil,” he rumbled, tilting the bottle to read a little label on its base. He removed his hand from my leg, making me want to whimper in protest, and pulled out the stopper.

Bringing it to his face, he sniffed cautiously. “No scent.”

I grinned wide. “Perfect.”

I had no idea if this stuff was actually safe for us to use as lube, but it was here, and I wasn’t prepared to go off in search of anything else when my dick was this achingly hard.

I was about to lean back and draw my legs up to give Gloam room to reach my ass, impatient to feel him inside me, but he set the bottle down and dipped his head to give me a slow, deep kiss before I could move.

I moaned into his mouth, shivering when his big hands returned to my thighs and slid up.

“There’s something else I must do first, my little firebrand,” Gloam murmured against my lips, making me shiver again.

When he moved down to kiss my neck, then my chest, I bit down hard on my lower lip and cupped the back of his smooth head.

My dick bucked in the air, dripping pre-cum, the base already tingling in anticipation of what was about to come. Gloam knelt, gripping my thighs tighter, and drew the head of my cock into his mouth to suck. My entire body jolted.

“Oh, fuck.” I looked down and made a strangled sound at the sight of Gloam’s mouth around my prick, his strange, beautiful eyes hidden by his long lashes.

He moaned, the vibration making me shake and clench my teeth as I gripped the back of his head too hard. And then he pulled back briefly, before swallowing my entire cock in one go.

“Oh *fuck*,” I repeated in a hoarse cry, shaking wildly as his cabled tongue stroked the base of my shaft where it met my sac. When he swallowed, his throat constricted like a vice around my cockhead. I let out a guttural shout.

“Fuck—baby—fuck, you—I can’t—” I was babbling, hands scrabbling frantically over the back of his head. “I’m gonna—w-wait, your throat—d-don’t hurt yourself—”

Gloam huffed an amused sound around my dick buried in his throat and swallowed again.

I cried out, lifting my trembling thighs to hook them over his wide shoulders, crossing my ankles between his shoulder blades so I could pull him closer. I let go of his head to grab onto the edge of the dresser in a white-knuckled grip, and used the leverage to push my hips up, everything

in my body urging me to get *deeper*, even though I was as deep in his mouth as I could ever be.

Gloam pulled back to take a breath, cabled tongue winding and licking around my weeping tip, then plunged my cock back into his throat.

I cried out again, shaking like a leaf. “Holy shit, your mouth is—I can __”

I’d never been deepthroated before, and I knew that I never could have been prepared for the way it felt. I was pretty sure there were more of those thick ridges actually *in* Gloam’s throat, sliding against my swollen, sensitive cockhead with every swallow.

This was going to kill me.

“W-wait, I don’t—Don’t make me come,” I begged breathlessly, even as my dick bucked in protest within Gloam’s throat. “I want you to fuck me—*Fuck,* Gloam—I’m g-gonna come—*s-stop*—”

My nuts wrenched up, hard and tight, and my dick grew agonisingly stiff in Gloam’s mouth. But he acquiesced and pulled back, though he sucked all the way up my dick in a slow, tight pull as he did it, making me twitch and groan between clenched teeth.

Hands sliding up and down the sides of my thighs, which were still hooked over his shoulders, Gloam looked up at me through his eyelashes. He turned his head to kiss my inner thigh, and then his wideset eyes gleamed as he leaned in to give the throbbing head of my cock a light lick.

“No,” I barked, still shuddering with sensitivity. It felt like my dick would explode with even a gentle breeze. “I’m too c-close. I’ll come. S-seriously.”

The puff of cool air that wafted over the wet head of my cock from Gloam’s amused huff almost did it. He kissed my thigh instead before standing up, and it was almost all over yet again when his hot erection brushed against the side of my dick. I’d never been so painfully aroused in my life. I couldn’t stop trembling, my breaths shuddering out of me.

I leaned back on the dresser until my shoulders met the cold wall, drawing my knees up to plant my heels against the edge and letting them fall open wide. My prick jumped against my belly from the sensation of being so exposed, especially when Gloam rumbled out a hoarse moan at the sight. My nuts were flushed deep with colour, already sitting at the very base of my shaft like two rocks, high and tight.

“Get me ready,” I panted, resisting the overwhelming urge to fist my cock and stroke hard and fast. It would only take me a handful of pumps—probably fewer—to come ridiculously hard, but I wanted to wait. I wanted Gloam to make me come with his big cock.

But he didn’t reach for the oil. He thudded back to his knees and wrapped his thick arms around my spread thighs, then leaned in and began eating my ass like a starving man.

My eyes rolled back in my head. “Oh my g-g-god.”

I stuttered out more nonsensical sounds, one hand reaching down to palm the back of his head, my fingers looking pale against the deep black mark there. My chest heaved, thighs straining as the tip of Gloam’s wide, flat nose brushed back and forth over my sac. His tongue pushed inside me repeatedly, fucking me in between the slick, lapping licks over my hole that made it clench in reaction.

I choked out a hoarse sound when he moaned against me, so low and deep that my legs twitched from the tingling vibration it sent directly up my ass. My cock was drooling onto my belly, bucking into the air, desperate for friction. Just the tiniest bit and I’d come like a geyser, I knew without a doubt.

“Gl-Gloam—I want your c-cock,” I managed to pant, moaning and shuddering again when he gave me one final, slow lick before the heat of his tongue and the warmth of his breath disappeared. My wet hole twitched in the cool air that replaced his mouth.

He finally reached for the oil with a trembling hand, and I could’ve cried in relief. I stayed in my completely wanton, spread out position on the dresser while he coated his fingers, my legs pulled up and my ass exposed and waiting for him.

My own hand twitched with the urge to finish myself off as I stared down the length of my body to watch him slick up his fingers. My cock was painfully stiff, purpling at the head and drooling so much pre-cum that my stomach was shiny with it. I was shaking like a leaf, and I knew I must have looked like a fucked-out mess already. My lower lip was swollen from where I’d bitten it repeatedly. My face was flushed and hot, my hair a tangled, too-long mess.

Gloam planted one hand beside my hip on the dresser, leaning over me while his other slid over my cock and nuts, down my taint to run the tip of his long, slick middle finger over my hole. I jerked at the feel, clamping

down on my lip again as I stared up at him looming above me, my gaze desperate.

He was so *big*. I was a decent height and solid build, but he made me feel small—in a good way. He made me feel safe, and his body could keep me so warm when he wrapped himself around me.

His face was different to anything I'd ever seen, but so beautiful. Those eerie eyes saw so much and took so much in. That full mouth was so gentle with me despite the short, fat fangs jutting from both rows of straight white teeth. I was already addicted to rubbing the tip of my nose against the elegant cabling that cut over his forehead and across his cheeks when we were lying in bed together.

"Gloam," I whispered, reaching up to cup his cheeks with shaking hands. His eyes, tight with lust, softened as he gazed back down at me, while below he carefully pushed in a second finger to join the first he'd already inserted, making my breath hitch.

"My precious Adam," he rumbled, making my breath catch again in my throat. He was the only one who called me that, and I loved it. Like it was our secret.

Soon he was pushing a third finger inside me, then—making me gulp—a fourth, but he was being so careful that the stretching ache didn't last all that long. Besides, I was too desperate for him to let any fleeting discomfort stop this, though I wasn't so sure if I'd be saying that when he had to work that huge swell inside me.

I was still harder than stone when he finally pulled his fingers free and got more oil to slick his cock. Still on the cusp of a monumental orgasm, trembling like a live wire with my cock already tingling at the base as though it was on the razor's edge of peaking already.

"Are you ready, Adam?" Gloam cupped my flushed face with his clean hand, thumbing my damp and swollen lower lip.

I shuddered and nodded, drawing my trembling legs up higher, grateful when Gloam removed his hand from my face to clasp behind my right knee and hold it up. His other hand was ringing the base of his thick cock, ready to work it inside me.

"I need your words, Adam," he rumbled softly, giving his cock a single stroke as he waited, making my mouth water.

"I'm ready. I want it." My voice was nothing more than a hoarse croak, and my eyes were heavy-lidded with lust when I raised them to meet his

gaze. “Put it in me, Gloam.”

He groaned and pressed forward, looking down between our bodies to watch. I manoeuvred myself up on shaky arms so I could do the same, staring down hungrily past my throbbing cock and tight balls to the sight of his flushed, slick tip kissing my softened hole.

“Oh shit.” I let out a long, shaky breath, bearing down so he could carefully work that tip inside.

“Oh *shit*,” I cried out again when it slipped inside, and my cock jerked with a single burst of cum, like a mini orgasm that made me shake wildly. Gloam let out a hoarse sound and let go of his cock to cup the back of my other knee, holding my legs up and out as he sank deeper inside. My eyes rolled back from the feel of those textured cables teasing my rim.

“Ohhh fuck, okay, shit, fuck,” I babbled when I felt his shaft start to widen considerably, and I knew that big swell was approaching. “G-go slow —Fuck—”

But Gloam was already slowing down, being achingly careful as he pulled back just a little before sinking forward again. He did it again and again, tunnelling a little deeper each time. My ass burned, his cock stretching me to my limit, but it was bearable because he was being so gentle. I panted through the ache.

I couldn’t stop the guttural, relieved groan that broke from my chest when the last of his swell broke through, the rest of his cock following easily. I panted, trembling, my legs weak and my prick now half-hard against my belly. At least I wasn’t in immediate danger of coming anymore.

“Are you alright, Adam?” Gloam leaned down to kiss my knee, shifting his cock inside me and making my whole body jerk.

He was vibrating with the need to thrust, arms bulging with tension and stomach muscles tight. His chest and shoulders looked even more huge while I was spread out beneath him like this, impaled on his thick cock. Pleasure tightened my balls, my dick stiffening back up.

“I’m okay.” My voice wavered, arms shaking where they still held me up. “It doesn’t hurt.”

Gloam rumbled a low sound and leaned in, practically folding me in half, to kiss my shoulder. “Promise you will tell me if it starts to.”

“I promise.” I was already distracted by the feel of him shifting inside me. I could absolutely feel his swell, because it was pressing against my prostate maddeningly. I needed him to *move.*

The first slow drag of his cock retreating from my ass made my hands scrabble frantically over the top of the wooden dresser. I could feel my hole straining against the resistance of his fat swell, but Gloam didn't pull out any further. He sank back in, and the drag of that bulge over my prostate made my eyes roll back.

I lowered myself unsteadily onto my elbows, my head falling back. It was too heavy to hold up as Gloam started fucking me in short, smooth strokes that never pushed me to my limit, because he didn't try to force my hole to strain around that bulge. He kept it inside me, filling me so full and putting constant pressure against my prostate, making me shake wildly with the sensation.

It didn't take long for Gloam to start thrusting faster—and harder—as he let out a low moan. My breath hitched with every thrust, my nuts throbbing as they smacked against his flat stomach. I lifted my heavy head to stare at him through bleary eyes, my brows pinched tight. He was already watching me, face tense with pleasure, white teeth and fangs bared as he worked his hips between my legs.

I reached for him and he moaned again, pulling me up and into his arms tight. The angle shifted his cock inside me, pressing it even harder against my prostate, and I shook against his chest as my ass tightened around him.

"Adam." His voice was gravelly, so deep against my neck. He kissed me there and dropped his hands to push them under my ass against the dresser, lifting me just an inch and tugging me tighter against him.

I cried out, curling my fingers under the straps of his harness and holding on for dear life as his cock pounded into me even harder. My dick was like steel between us, jerking wildly with our frantic movements, but I couldn't let go of him to grab it.

When I felt the bulge on Gloam's cock swell even harder, I practically tried to scale his big body.

"Fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck—"

He covered my mouth with a rumble of amusement, his other arm resituating to keep me tight to his body.

"You'll attract every creature for miles if you get much louder, my firebrand," he rumbled in my ear, and the sound of his voice sent a rush of pleasure through my nuts and up my tingling cock.

"Fuck, m'gonna come," I moaned desperately against his palm, shoving a hand between us to fist my dick. It bucked in the cage of my fingers,

harder than it had ever been before, and I stroked it recklessly fast until ecstasy burst from my prostate, wrenching up my nuts and shooting bliss through the length of my cock.

I was pretty sure I blacked out for just a second when I came, a hoarse shout burning my throat as cum shot from me so hard I felt it hit my chin. I was also pretty sure I was drooling against Gloam's palm and making muffled, nonsensical sounds. I lost complete control of my body for just a few seconds as I spurted round after round between us. Gloam's swell rubbed against my prostate relentlessly, milking my balls until they were so drained they ached.

He let out a deep, guttural groan and yanked me closer, impaling me tighter on his throbbing cock as he started to come. The feel of it made one final, weak spurt dribble from my cock, but I was a boneless, useless mess at that point.

I collapsed fully against him, moaning at the feel of his cock kicking inside me as I wrapped my legs around his twitching hips and clung on. I physically couldn't lift my head from his chest by the time the tension finally drained from his body and he sagged against me.

"If you let go of me, I'll just collapse onto the ground and I won't be able to get back up," I mumbled shakily against his chest. It vibrated with his low, rumbling laugh, and he pulled back to drop a gentle kiss on my flushed face.

"I won't let go. I'll take you to bed in a minute, my firebrand. But first I have to pull out. Are you ready?"

I nodded, too relaxed to worry about any discomfort. Gloam fucking me senseless helped immensely. I was too worn out to tense up at all, which meant he could ease his cock out fairly easily.

Still, I'd be feeling that tomorrow. And the next day.

After gently prying my fingers loose from his harness, he gathered me up into his arms and carried me out of Mary's room.

I cast one final look at it over his shoulder and raised my weak arm to give it an actual middle finger, as a final nail in her coffin.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“What… what do we do with him?” I asked Gloam the next morning as we stared at Seraph in his cage, separated from where the other monsters had been kept in the barn.

All the other cages were empty now, the last of the beasties free. Gloam had taken them far away, with big hunks of meat to distract them and his war hammer just in case. But even though they’d been the more dangerous ones, they’d all simply fled without attacking or even looking back, the freedom they’d been denied for so long too much of a lure.

But there was still one left.

“Why did she keep him back here and not in the main room?”

Gloam grunted a disgusted sound. “Too loud. Too unruly. Too ugly. Not my words, obviously. He didn’t fit with the rest of her *collection.*”

“Then why did she capture him?”

“She didn’t.” Gloam tilted his head as he eyed Seraph, who was curled up in the corner of his cage, unmoving. But his multiple eyes were watching us warily. I wondered if he could understand us.

“The military gave him to her,” Gloam continued, and I grimaced.

“So the military captured him but didn’t want him anymore?” I wondered why. Probably because they couldn’t control him. “Why didn’t they just let him go?”

Gloam turned his head to look down at me, a tiny, sad smile on his mouth. “Would *you* want him roaming the Wastes?”

I suppressed a shudder, but couldn’t stop myself inching closer to Gloam and clinging onto his thick arm. “Surely there are others like him out there already, though. He can’t be the only one.”

Gloam cocked his head, watching Seraph again. “I have never seen anything like him before.”

I stared up at him. “What, really? But… you know *everything.*”

He chuckled and reached across to smooth his hand through my hair. “Of course I don’t.”

“Uh, yeah you do.” I stared at Seraph. “So he’s a… what is he?”

“I don’t know,” Gloam mused, sounding both intrigued and concerned, like Seraph was a puzzle he wanted to solve.

I smiled and pressed my cheek to his bulging bicep. I never thought I'd be attracted to a super-intelligent type—someone eager to learn all they could, fascinated by everything. But with Gloam, it totally did it for me.

Everything about Gloam did it for me.

"What did the military say when they brought him?" I asked, sensing myself getting distracted by the feel of his big muscles twitching under my cheek.

"I wasn't there for the conversation, my love. I just watched them unload him from a vehicle and bring him into the barn."

Of course. Mary had made him hide away when the military visited.

"I've seen hints of intelligence in him, though," Gloam said, gently tugging his arm free from my grip to wrap it around my shoulders, pulling me tighter into his side. "Moments of awareness. I think he can understand us."

I stared at Seraph, half-expecting him to give us some kind of sign that he could, even if it was just a snarl. But there was nothing. He seemed listless compared to the frantic, manic energy that had driven him to try and break free from his cage when he first saw me.

"Is… Is he ill?" I whispered. "He seems different."

Gloam suddenly rumbled out words in his flowing, smooth language. Even though it was wholly alien to me, I could tell it was a curse. He kissed the top of my head before walking to a cabinet at the side of the room, pulling open the doors.

"There is a drug that is supposed to be added to his food," he said as he pulled out a sleek black case and unzipped it. Inside were two neat rows of pre-filled syringes, ten in total. "The military brought it when they delivered him here, and they bring more when they visit. Mary ordered me to add it to his meals. She made me give him a huge dose before we left for your camp."

"A drug?" I glanced uneasily at Seraph and shuffled closer to Gloam, wanting to be at his side even though the dangerous beastie was behind glass and thick metal bars. And right now, he didn't even look all that dangerous. Just morose. "What if it's… Is it bad for him?"

Gloam removed a syringe and turned to face me with a sad smile. "I don't know, Adam. But he's been taking it since he got here, and he's still alive."

He gestured at Seraph sitting slumped weakly in the corner of his cage. His many eyes were drooping a little, and their discordant blinks were sluggish.

“He doesn’t look well now, and he hasn’t had this for a while.” He held up the syringe. “Until we know more, I think it’s safest to keep him on it. It could be the only thing keeping him alive.”

I knew he was right, but it still felt… dirty.

I nodded, swallowing as I glanced back at Seraph. “But how will we find out more? It’s not like the military will tell us.”

“Mary’s journals may help.” Gloam crossed the room to the door and dragged in the bucket filled with raw meat that he’d used to lure away the last of the more volatile beasties. “I will read them to see if we can find any answers.”

I wrinkled my nose, partly because of his words, but mainly from watching him lift a huge chunk of meat from the bucket and plunge the syringe into bright red muscle.

“You really want to read what that asshole wrote?”

He chuckled, carefully discarding the syringe before picking up a long metal pole with a hook at its end. “Not particularly. But it may help.”

I watched as he stepped closer to Seraph’s cage and lifted the pole to extend it to the cell’s roof, using the hook to open a small hatch up there. Then he drew the pole back to pierce the hook through the chunk of injected meat.

Seraph didn’t move as he tracked the lump of raw meat dropping into his cell, landing in the centre with a wet splatter of blood. Gloam closed the hatch and set the pole aside, and we both watched as Seraph slowly uncurled his overly long limbs and reached for the meat with trembling fingers.

“So… what do you want to do?” I asked Gloam as we watched Seraph take a tentative bite into the raw meat.

I thought I saw his monstrous features twist into a grimace as he did it, no doubt from the taste of the chemicals that had been injected. But it wasn’t like he had any other choices. I felt bad for him, despite how much he scared me. I wondered if he was aware that he was being drugged.

“Well.” Gloam cocked his head, crossing his huge arms. “I don’t particularly want us to stay here.”

“No,” I said quickly. “Me neither. We’re going back to the camp, right? Together? Both of us?”

I flushed at the neediness in my tone—the desire for the reassurance that he was staying with me. He’d already said he would, but… would he get bored? He was so smart, so interested in the world.

Would I be enough for him?

“I go where you go, Adam.”

I squirmed with a sudden wave of uncertainty, even as warmth suffused every part of me.

“I don’t… I’m worried I’ve guilted you into staying with me.” My face felt too hot. “You don’t have to come with me if you don’t want to. If you d-don’t… want to stay with me. You’re free now. You can go wherever you want.”

Gloam turned to face me, a little wrinkle appearing above those jagged ridges between his brows. “I only want to be with you. Do you want me to stay with you?”

I tried to think of a tactful, gentle way of saying that I didn’t want him to feel *pressured* into staying with me, but in the end I blurted, “Yes. I want to be with you more than anything. But I mean—we don’t have to stay at the camp. We can go wherever you want. If you want to explore. If you wanted to see more of this world. I know that’s what you came here to do.”

“Adam.” Gloam cupped my face, his lips quirking into an affectionate little smile. “All I want is to spend the rest of my days at your side. Wherever that is. The camp is your home, which means it will be mine.”

He paused. “If they let me stay.”

God, I hadn’t even started considering what might happen when we got back to camp. Anchor had said several times she was scared of Gloam. And he’d been *with* Mary. Unwillingly, sure, but some raiders wouldn’t see it that way. Cutter wouldn’t.

“They’ll let you stay,” I said fiercely, reaching up to grip his harness. “And if they don’t, fuck all of them. Me, you, Aury and Ghost will go make a new camp. We’ll take Lilac.”

Gloam went completely still. “Aury?”

Uncertain, I let go of his harness. “Um… yeah. The rycke.”

“You said the rycke left.”

I flushed, fidgeting under his intense gaze. “Oh, right. Yeah. That was… um, just a ruse to get Mary to leave. It was Aury’s idea. He and Ghost left

for another camp. So he really *was* gone—Mary went into the camp to look, remember? It's just that… um… he was going to come back after she left."

Gloam didn't move for a long moment, then rumbled out a deep laugh. "Clever. And this Ghost—the rycke has mated to him?"

I coughed out an awkward laugh. "Uh, yeah. Multiple times. My room's next to Ghost's, and they were pretty loud—"

Gloam chuckled. "I didn't mean like that, my firebrand. I meant this Ghost is the rycke's mate? They are… bonded?"

I shrugged. "I don't know about anything official, but they definitely seemed to be heading that way when they left for the other camp."

"Mm." His brow furrowed again as he raised a hand and ran his thumb back and forth over his lower lip, deep in thought. I stared, mesmerised.

"We will have to be very careful, if the rycke views this Ghost or the camp as his."

I quirked a brow. "Why?"

"The rycke is… possessive. But not as bad as people think. Legends always get distorted."

"No!" I rushed to defend Aury. "I mean, maybe other ryckes were bad but Aury is the sweetest guy, seriously."

Gloam chuckled and cupped my chin. "*You* are the sweetest, my little firebrand."

I felt an odd mix of pleasure and embarrassment. I gave his stomach a half-hearted shove, but got distracted by how hard his muscles were.

"That still leaves the question of Seraph, though." Gloam pulled me into his side and turned us to face the silently eating monster. "We can't just leave him here. But we don't want to stay."

I swallowed, feeling a little ill. "So I guess we… have to take him with us?"

I was a hundred percent sure that Anchor would absolutely object to that. And the rest of the camp.

"Can we?" Gloam looked unsure. "He is very dangerous. Not that we would let him out of the cage yet, but…"

He sighed and turned his long pupils to me. "I could start reading Mary's journals now, before we leave, but… I think my mind needs some rest first."

"Yeah, no. No fuckin' way." I wrapped my arms around his middle and kissed his chest. "We all need a big, fat break from Mary. Honestly, I'm

ready to leave this whole place behind."

"Me too," Gloam murmured, dipping his head to nuzzle my hair. "Which means, I suppose, we do have to take him with us."

I shivered and turned in his arms to look at Seraph again. He'd stopped eating and was back in the corner, still listless. Maybe it took a while for the drugs to kick in.

"How are we going to bring his cage with us?" I asked. I also desperately wanted to scavenge for stuff to take back to the camp, but I had no idea how we'd carry all of it with us.

Gloam stilled, his arms wrapped around me from behind. "We could take Mary's RV. And attach Seraph's cage to the back of it somehow."

"But the RV doesn't work."

"The borolesh could still pull it."

I made a face at that. "I don't like that. They've had to pull that thing all over the Wastes for so long."

"The weight is nothing to them, Adam. They are incredibly strong."

"But it's still… forcing them to do labour for us."

"Just one more time." He kissed the top of my head. "Then we free them."

I perked up. "Can they live in the forest behind the camp? So we can go visit them?"

He chuckled. "We can't tell them where to live, but if there are plenty of leaves for them to eat, they will most likely choose to stay."

I grinned at that. I liked those big ballbag beasties. I liked the thought of keeping watch on the camp wall and seeing them free to move around the forest, eating all the leaves they wanted.

"Okay, so." My brain started churning, grateful for a task to focus on. "We need something to put Seraph's cage on that we can attach to the back of the RV."

"I leave that in your capable hands, my love." Gloam palmed my head and kissed the top of it. "You'll think of something."

"What—no!" I flushed. "You're the smart one."

He snorted and let go of me to cross the room and grab his war hammer, resting against the wall beside the door.

"No. I am just the muscle." He shot me a teasing grin. "Just tell me what you need me to lift or pull, and I will do it."

“Well now all I can think about is your muscles, so I’m useless.” I crossed the room and leaned up to kiss him. I’d never get used to being able to do that.

He kissed me back with a low rumble, but we pulled apart before we got too distracted. I wasn’t overly interested in getting naked with Gloam while Seraph watched with his many eyes—and I was sure the creepy monster wasn’t too interested in seeing that either.

“Okay, I’ll go start looking.” I couldn’t stop myself dropping a final kiss on his chest.

Gloam nodded. “I will think of a way to get Seraph’s cage out of the barn.”

Reluctant to be apart from him even for a little while, I left the barn to start searching for a way to transport Seraph.

In the end, I found a wide flatbed truck in a small garage tucked around the back of the guest house that the military had used. Gloam pushed it over to the RV, and we used his old chain to hook the two vehicles together.

Then Gloam started smashing down the side of the barn with his war hammer to get Seraph’s cage out, seeming to enjoy it far more than I suspected he would ever admit to. I left him to it and went into the mansion to scavenge. If we were taking the RV, I was going to cram as much stuff as I could in there.

I went to Mary’s study and shoved all her stupid journals in an old suitcase for Gloam, as well as a couple of fiction books for Ghost and Aury. Snooping around her bedroom, I found a neat row of nail polishes on the vanity. For some reason, I felt like Ghost might have liked them, so I took them too.

I took towels, some clothes, and all the food and booze from the big, fancy kitchen with its gleaming double-door refrigerator and spotlessly clean worktops. If we turned up with enough alcohol to get the whole camp drunk for several nights, surely it would soften them enough to let Gloam stay. And Seraph—not that I knew where we were going to put him.

I jogged to the garage to take some of the tools, but after wandering around the mansion for a little while, I realised Mary didn’t have a whole lot of other useful stuff in this place. Most of the good stuff was already in the RV. The generator, the record player—because yes, I wanted to keep that—her gun, and the RV itself.

I made my way back across the huge front lobby, the bulging suitcase's wheels making a soft whirr as they rolled over the marble. I paused in front of the ornate console table by the front doors and, after glancing around sneakily to make sure Gloam hadn't come in, shoved everything off it just to make myself feel better. A huge porcelain vase decorated with gold leaf smashed into a million pieces, and the lid of a little golden trinket box snapped off as it hit the hard floor.

"Fuck you, Mary," I muttered as I made my way outside.

"Are you alright?" Gloam asked with a concerned frown as I approached. He straightened up from where he'd been clearing a path for Seraph's cage. "I heard something smash."

I cleared my throat. "I just knocked into a vase on my way out."

He nodded and shoved away another plank of wood that had made up part of the barn's side wall. There was a big gaping hole there now, and Seraph was twitching and pacing in his cage inside the room. He had to stoop, the height of it too short for his towering frame.

I put my hands on my hips and looked at the cage. "How do we get it out and up onto the truck bed?"

We found more chains in the barn—Mary had a lot of them—and looped them around the cage so Gloam could drag it outside. I was useless for that part—partly because it was way too heavy for me to shoulder even some of the weight, but mainly because I was mesmerised watching Gloam's huge body strain as he pulled the cage, his muscles bulging and veins popping out in those thick arms.

We made a ramp up to the truck bed, and Gloam grunted as he slowly pushed Seraph's cage up it. The beastie was still quiet, but definitely more alert. He knelt in his cage, all his eyes swivelling in different directions as he took everything in. I wondered how long he'd been stuck in there—how long it'd been since he'd seen anything but the four walls of the depressing little room Mary had shoved him in.

Then it was time to get the borolesh.

"I know you said the RV's weight doesn't bother them, but the truck's attached to it now." I hurried after Gloam as he strode toward the two big beasties, still tucked among the trees in the corner by the lake.

The lake where Mary's headless body now rested.

"Will it be too heavy for them?" I worried my lower lip. "Will it hurt them?"

Gloam shook his head, reaching back to smooth his hand through my hair. “They’ll be fine, my love.”

We reached the borolesh, who warbled softly at Gloam’s arrival. He raised a hand to stroke the flank of the nearest.

“One more journey, friends.” His voice was a soft rumble. “Then you can live in peace.”

I wrapped my arms around one of his and tilted my cheek to his bicep. They’d been his only companions—his only friends—for so long. I really hoped they stayed close to the camp when we got there. I suspected Gloam would miss them if they left.

He clicked at the pair and they followed him, lumbering behind us on their big front arms and shorter back legs. We hooked their harnesses back up to the chains still dangling from the front of the RV.

All that was left to do was leave.

“I have an idea,” I blurted, grabbing Gloam’s hand and tugging him toward the house.

He let me lead him through the huge lobby—I cleared my throat awkwardly at the sight of the stuff I’d smashed—and into the east wing up to Mary’s bedroom.

Gloam looked around with a frown when I dropped his hand. “What are we doing in here, Adam?”

“We’re gonna smash it up.”

To demonstrate, I walked to the vanity and shoved everything off it. Glass perfume bottles and an old-fashioned handheld mirror crashed to the floor, releasing an overpowering amalgamation of eye-wateringly strong floral scents.

Gloam eyed me with a cabled brow raised. “That seems somewhat… juvenile.”

I flushed, shrugging as I looked down at the floor and kicked a bottle of lotion.

“I never claimed to be mature,” I muttered. “I’m only twenty-five. Technically my brain’s only just fully developed. I’ve got less than a year left to be a reckless idiot before I have to start being sensible.”

My cheeks still red, I grinned up at him. Gloam boomed out a laugh.

“I’m afraid I don’t have that excuse, my little firebrand.”

“How old *are* you?” I asked, curious. I knew Aury was around seven hundred. Gloam seemed… not old, but wise. Sure in himself.

“A little over a thousand.”

I blinked. “Oh. Okay. Just a small age gap, then.”

He chuckled and walked over to cup my chin. “Does it bother you?”

“No.” I palmed his sides, smiling up at him. “I’ll still love you when you’re old and… still grey, and I’m just a sprightly seventy-year-old.”

Gloam’s smile faltered, his pupils flickering with sudden sadness.

“What?” I asked, stepping closer and wrapping my arms around his back.

He gave me a small smile and kissed my forehead. “Nothing, my love. Alright, then. Let’s destroy Mary’s room.”

I perked up. “Yeah? You’re up for it? Awesome.”

Releasing him, I walked over to the bed and tore down the thick red curtains hanging from the four posts. Then I pushed over the nightstand, grinning when the lamp shattered on the floor.

I *did* feel juvenile, but fuck it. This was Mary’s room. This was where she’d slept and preened at herself in the mirror while the monsters she’d captured withered away in cages. While Gloam was forced to carry out her every demand with a cage on his head and rings piercing his spine.

Fuck her.

It didn’t take long for Gloam to join in. He lifted his war hammer over his head and brought it down directly into the centre of Mary’s huge bed. The frame crashed to the ground, the four tall posts sagging inward.

I laughed and picked up the red velvet pouf in front of the vanity and brought it down hard on the ground so all four stubby legs snapped off. While I opened the wardrobe and ripped out all of Mary’s stupid dresses, Gloam swung his war hammer at the freestanding mirror beside the dresser, adding to the pile of shards already on the floor beside it.

“We’ll leave the dresser intact,” he said to me with a smirk, and my gut tightened at the memory of what we’d done on it. I could still feel the lingering tenderness in my ass, but I was already wondering when we could do it again.

Once Mary’s bedroom was suitably destroyed, we detoured past the linen closet so I could grab fresh sheets and blankets. Mary had slept in the bed in the RV—and probably so had the shulc—so it was getting stripped before Gloam went anywhere near it.

The borolesh were waiting patiently when we emerged from the mansion. Seraph was silent but alert in his cage on the bed of the truck. He

knelt and placed his long-fingered hands on the glass, watching us carefully as we opened the RV door and headed inside. The vehicle groaned as Gloam's heavy boots thudded up the steps, and he had to stoop slightly once he was inside.

I wrinkled my nose as I looked around. It smelled like Mary's perfume in here still, as well as the lingering metallic tang of blood from all the little animals she'd let the shulc crunch up in here.

The RV was spacious, with a compact galley kitchen and decent living area. There was a little table tucked by the window with two narrow built-in benches either side. A small bookcase set into the wall was stuffed with romance novels.

Smiling back at Gloam, I said, "At least we don't have to walk back, huh?"

I set down the sheets on the table and went to explore the rest, a miniscule bathroom and one bedroom at the back. I gulped when I realised the high-up, narrow window we'd sat under every night was the one in the bedroom. Thank god Mary had been an obnoxious ass and a heavy sleeper.

"Are you ready to leave, my love?" Gloam poked his head into the bedroom, giving it a quick glance. He'd probably never set foot in here either. "I'll get the borolesh moving if so."

I nodded and followed him back through the RV.

"I'll change the sheets," I said, grabbing the clean stack from the table. I planned on falling into bed with Gloam the moment we were on the move. It was too soon for me to bottom again, but there was still plenty we could do. *Plenty.*

I heard him open one of the windows before his soft clicks drifted back as I stripped the small bed. Would Gloam even fit in this? Only one way to find out.

The RV swayed gently as the borolesh started moving, heading for the heavy front gates that Gloam had already opened. I heard a distressed bark come from Seraph beyond the narrow window as the pickup truck creaked forward.

"Are you sure it's not too heavy for them?" I called to Gloam worriedly. "Seraph looks like he weighs a decent amount too."

"They're fine, Adam."

Trusting him, I finished making the bed with clean sheets before wandering back through to the main area. Gloam was sitting in the driver's

seat, watching the borolesh as they lumbered forward, taking us past the gates and away from Mary's estate.

I sat myself down on his lap sideways, kissing his neck before resting my head on his shoulder. "You'll never have to come back here again."

Gloam rumbled and wrapped his arms around me tight, nuzzling my temple. "Thanks to you."

I waved an arm. "I barely did a thing."

He chuckled and kissed the top of my head. "So, my little firebrand. We have a long journey ahead of us back to your camp."

"*Our* camp." I lifted my head to shoot him a salacious grin. "What shall we do with all this time? No more walking for us. We can stay flat on our backs the entire way. Preferably naked."

He laughed, rising from the seat and wrapping my legs around his waist when I clung onto him like a spider monkey.

"Let's see how much time we can pass then, my love," he said as he carried me back to the bedroom.

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CHAPTER THIRTY

We'd been travelling for several days, during which time we barely left the tiny bedroom of the RV, before Gloam decided to help the borolesh pull the two vehicles.

We found a plastic bin under the seating filled with chains, which Gloam told me Mary had made him use to tether any captured beasties to him when they were out here. We hooked one end to the front of the RV, and Gloam wrapped the other around his hand and forearm to help the borolesh pull.

I walked alongside him, keeping him company. It felt different being out here now, without Mary and the shulc lurking inside. We'd made this journey once. I knew we could do it again.

Besides, Seraph had started screaming again after a few days, which was definitely scaring off any beasties who got curious about our weird little procession. He kept slamming his long body into the sides of the cage. We didn't know if he was trying to smash the glass or tip the whole thing off the back of the truck. His screams were raw and agonised, like he was in immense pain. But we didn't yet know if the drug was causing it or helping to lessen it, so there was nothing we could do.

We fed him meat every day, which Gloam caught for me as well, but hadn't given him another dose of his mysterious drug yet. Gloam said he didn't have it every day, more like once a week. I tried to remember how many doses were in the little case we'd brought with us. Ten, I thought, and Gloam had used one before we left.

So, we had nine weeks to try and figure out what was going on with the terrifying beastie that the military had given to Mary.

"Did she never show him to her guests?" I asked Gloam as we walked, Seraph roaring from his cage behind the RV.

"Oh no, she did." Gloam's tone was grim. "He was her *piece de resistance* when she was holding fights. There have been many other creatures in her collection. When she no longer wanted them, she would put them in the fighting cage with Seraph."

The blood drained out of my face at the thought. "Jesus."

“I have never seen him fight, but she made me clean the cage after the guests had left.” Gloam exhaled a hard breath. “It was gruesome.”

“I… I bet.” I peered over my shoulder, even though I could only just see the edge of Seraph’s cage. I pictured that wide mouth bursting with needle-sharp teeth and shivered.

“Do you think he’s just… innately violent? Like, there’s no hope for him?” The thought made me sad.

Gloam looked over at me. “I don’t know. I’m hoping Mary’s journals will shed some light on his situation. But I want to help him, if we can. I suppose I feel… somewhat responsible for him. I don’t think he has anything else.”

I smiled over at my beastie from behind my mask. “If anyone can help him, you can.”

Gloam chuckled. “You’ll give me a big head.”

My gut tightened as my mind went to dirty places, even though we hadn’t long gotten out of bed, where we definitely had *not* been sleeping.

“How about I give you—”

Gloam stopped suddenly, making me fall silent. He clicked at the borolesh to stop, and the whole procession came to a halt.

“What’s wrong?” I asked nervously, eyes darting over the ground as though I’d somehow be able to sense a giant death worm about to burst through it.

“People up ahead.”

I followed Gloam’s intense gaze into the far distance, but I couldn’t see anything.

What he said next made me freeze.

“It’s the rycke.”

“What?” I went stock still for a second, before I ripped open the RV door, tripping up the steps to grab Mary’s binoculars.

By the time I got back outside, I could just about make out a dark blot on the horizon when I squinted. I raised the binoculars to my eyes, quickly adjusting them until everything came into sharp focus.

I choked on a breath. “Holy shit. It’s Ghost.”

Lowering the binoculars, I started jumping up and down and waving my arms frantically. “Ghost! Aury!”

Gloam let out a low rumble of amusement as I ripped off my mask, cupped my hands around my mouth and screamed, “*GHOST!*”

I didn’t expect him to yell back—I didn’t know if Ghost’s quiet voice could even go that loud—but I saw an arm raise into the air and wave.

“Oh my god.” I was vibrating as I ran to Gloam’s side and gripped his harness. “It’s Ghost and Aury!”

“I guessed.” His voice was dry.

“Honestly, Aury’s cool, okay? He’s not dangerous, I promise.” I rushed to get the words out, frantic for them to reach us. “Can we get moving again to meet them?”

Gloam looked wary, but he nodded once and clicked at the borolesh, joining them when they started pulling the RV.

By the time Aury and Ghost were fully visible—wait, was Aury’s wing fixed?—I was tearful at the thought of seeing my best friend again.

“Holy shit,” I blubbered when Ghost and I started running to meet in the middle of the remaining distance.

“What the fuck are you doing all the way out here?” I threw my arms around his neck and squeezed him so hard he choked. His gas mask dug into my shoulder.

Sniffling, I blurted out, “I’m sorry for being such a shitty friend. I promise I’ll do the scavenging runs from now on so you don’t have to. I didn’t—”

“What are you talking about, dork?” I could hear the grin in Ghost’s voice as he hugged me back. But then he jerked away and grabbed my arms. “Wait. Is Mary in there?”

When he cast a fearful glance back at Aury, who was slowly walking to join us with a sweet smile on his face, I quickly shook my head.

“No. No Mary. She’s dead.”

“She’s dead?” Ghost stared at me, his blue eyes wide.

I nodded. “Gloam smashed her face in with his war hammer. Come meet Gloam!”

“Wha—who—”

“He’s called Gloam.” I was bouncing as I dragged Ghost toward the RV. “She had some kind of curse or spell on him or something—I know, it sounds ridiculous—and we got the cage off and then he could—”

“Rig.” Ghost was straining to pull free from my grip. “Wait. Aury.”

“Oh right, sure.” I stopped, fidgeting impatiently as Aury finally caught up to us.

“Hey, Aury!” I went to hug him, only remembering the barbs around his neck when he instead clasped my shoulders in a gentle grip.

“It’s good to see you safe, Rig.” His alien face glowed with a sweet smile, the burn scars on one side tightening. But then his black eyes became uncertain when they lifted over my head to Gloam, who was standing silent by the borolesh.

“This is Gloam,” I blurted, pulling away to go to his side and clutch his arm. “He protected me from beasties and Mary, even when she had total control over him—he was forced to do what she said, okay? He didn’t want to do any of it. And I love him and if Anchor says he can’t stay at the camp, then fuck her, we’ll go make our own camp.”

Ghost and Aury looked a little dazed. Gloam chuckled quietly beside me, tentatively brushing a hand through my hair, as if he wasn’t sure if he could touch me in front of them.

To emphasise my point, I dropped a kiss on his big bicep and stared defiantly at Ghost and Aury.

“I… um… that’s great, Rig,” Ghost said weakly as Aury chuckled. “We knew she was holding him captive, so…”

He looked like he didn’t know quite what to do. It was Aury who stepped forward, hesitant, like he wasn’t sure how Gloam was going to react.

Gloam’s big body was tense beside me as the rycke approached.

“It’s good to see you free, friend.” Aury’s voice was quiet, and he stopped several paces away. “I hope Anchor agrees to you staying in the camp. I know my mate does, too.”

He looked at me with a brief smile. “Rig is very important to me. As is the camp. It would be nice to have another hand helping to protect them all.”

After a long moment, Gloam’s stiff muscles relaxed just a little under my hands. He nodded.

“It’s good to finally be free. Thanks to Ad—Rig.” He shot me a small smile. “If the camp lets me stay, I will gladly stand with you to defend it.”

He paused, then stepped forward to briefly grasp Aury’s shoulder in a friendly grip. The big, winged monster beamed, his eyes jumping as he looked back at Ghost as though making sure he’d witnessed it.

My god, those two were the cutest.

Just as I was about to ask Ghost yet again what they were doing all the way out here, Seraph let out a bloodcurdling roar from behind the RV.

Aury's eyes suddenly flashed, as if a dark fire had been lit behind them.

Ghost hurriedly stepped forward and pulled him back a few steps. "Shit."

"No, it's okay," I rushed to get out, holding my hands up because the look in Aury's eyes was freaking me out. "It's just Seraph. He's in a cage. He can't get out."

"Who's Seraph?" Ghost was suddenly jittery with anxiety. He tugged Aury back another few steps, but the rycke looked calm again. His head tilted as he listened to Seraph's screams.

"We don't know," Gloam answered, his voice deep and rumbling. "The military gave him to Mary. He was too dangerous to let free with the others, so we are hoping to find answers in Mary's journals when we make it to the camp."

"S-so you managed to free all of Mary's monsters?" Ghost asked, half distracted as he kept glancing worriedly at Aury, but I wanted to preen when he shot me a brief, awed look.

"I want to see him," Aury said in a weird voice. He started walking toward the back of the RV, his huge wings dragging behind him. The damaged one *was* fixed. I had no idea how they'd managed that. It had been an absolute mess.

Ghost hurried after him. "Aury, is that a good idea—"

"I am fine, Ghost. He cannot hurt you."

Gloam and I exchanged a look before following them.

"He is very powerful, that one," Gloam murmured quietly to me, but his low voice must have travelled, because Aury looked back at us with big, sad eyes. "Be alert if anything threatens Ghost."

"Why?" I whispered.

"Because he will tear everything to shreds if anything does."

My eyes bulged at that. Aury? Sweet, timid Aury, tearing everything to shreds? Before I could answer, Aury stepped up to the side of the truck, a frantic Ghost behind him, and stared at Seraph.

The beastie in the cage fell silent immediately. His many eyes blinked, all out of sync, as he stared back.

"Jesus," Ghost whispered, looking reluctant to get any closer.

When Aury raised a pale, long-fingered hand to the glass, we all tensed.

Seraph stared at it for long moments, his lean chest still heaving from his earlier bellows. His eyes swivelled between Aury's face and hand for long moments, before he cautiously crept forward. He slowly lifted his hand on the other side of the cage.

Ghost and I jumped when he started smashing his palms against the glass and screaming again, right in Aury's face. Neither of the monsters reacted, aside from Gloam letting out a sad sigh.

"Aury, can you get back from the cage please?" Ghost's voice was tense with worry.

"There's something wrong with him," Aury whispered, but slowly lowered his hand and stepped back.

"Can you tell what it is?" Gloam asked cautiously.

He shook his head, his big dark eyes turning to us. His face was sad—and unsettled. "He is pure chaos inside."

"The military gave him to Mary," I said, shuffling closer to Gloam and gripping his arm. "They've been injecting him with something, but we don't know what. We brought it with us because it could be the only thing keeping him alive."

"I don't think he wants to be alive," Aury murmured, which made my blood run cold.

"We're going to try and figure it out. To help him." I gestured at Gloam. "Well, Gloam is. He's the smart one."

Gloam huffed at that, but before he could say anything, Ghost threaded his fingers through Aury's and led him away from Seraph.

"Maybe he can't be helped."

I bristled. "Someone else might have found Aury and said the same thing. Or Gloam."

Ghost's face flushed above his gas mask.

"I'm not saying *not* to help him, just…" He gave me a concerned look. "Just don't be too upset if you can't, Rig. You can't help everyone."

"He did the impossible helping me." Gloam pulled me tight into his side and kissed the top of my head. "I think we'll able to do it. We'll figure it out, won't we, firebrand?"

I flushed with pleasure as Gloam smiled down at me.

After a second, Ghost's eyes creased with a knowing smile. "Well, we're not going to figure it out standing in the Wastes. Shall we start heading back to camp?"

As he and Aury passed, he scrubbed a hand through my hair then flicked the fringe hanging off the sleeve of my western jacket. “You’re looking a little unkempt, buddy. And your baby’s a little worse for wear.”

I looked down at my jacket. He was right. It was scuffed, dirty, the inner lining torn along the bottom hem. This thing had been my pride and joy for years, and I’d kept it spotlessly clean and practically brand new despite wearing it every single day.

I shrugged with a chuckle. “Yeah. Kind of hard to keep on top of jacket maintenance when you’re fighting off beasties and cannibal cults out in the Wastes.”

Ghost choked and spun around to face me. “Cannibal cults?”

I laughed at how wide his eyes bulged.

“Yeah. I got shit to tell you.” We started walking again, Gloam picking up the chain and clicking at the borolesh to get them to move. They were skittish, their drooping eyes darting to Aury every few seconds. “But you still haven’t told us what you’re doing out here.”

“Looking for you, dork.”

For the second time, I flushed with pleasure. “Oh.”

“We had no idea what Mary or her pets were going to do to you.” Ghost peered around me to Gloam, the visible part of his face going pink. “No offence.”

“None taken.” Gloam shot me a smile as he helped the borolesh pull the RV.

“We were coming to rescue you.”

I eyed him. “Even though Mary was after Aury? You were willing to risk coming across her again, after all that?”

Ghost squirmed and looked up at Aury, who was walking in silence with his head bent. I looked at his wings again. Both still ragged looking, but whole.

“Yeah, so um… there’s something you should know.”

I quirked a brow at him, glancing at Aury then over to Gloam, whose expression was a little grim—as if he knew what was coming.

“Yeah?” I looked back at Ghost. “What’s that?”

“Aury can… he has… he can change into, um… a different form.”

I slowed my steps, then stopped dead. “Huh?”

Ghost stopped too, so Gloam quickly clicked to get the borolesh to come to a halt.

“So, yeah, we um… we’re kind of mated now.” Ghost’s face was adorably red. “And so if anything threatens me, he kind of um… goes into berserker mode.”

I stared at Ghost for a long moment, before slowly swinging my eyes to Aury. The winged monster looked flushed and anxious, his big eyes almost pleading with me to understand.

This monster? Berserker mode?

I barked out a laugh. “Are you fucking with me?”

“No,” Gloam said quietly, which made my eyes jump to him in shock.

“Wait—really?”

“We’ve been practising,” Ghost rushed out. “While we were looking for you. He can control it now. He’s not dangerous. I mean, unless someone tries to kill me.”

He looked at Aury and gave him a little smile beneath his mask. “Shall we show him?”

“Do you think it’s safe to?” Aury sounded nervous.

“Yes.” Ghost gave his hand a squeeze. “I trust you. You’ve worked so hard to control it. You can do this.”

Okay, what the fuck was going on here? If they were telling the truth, and Aury *could* go into “berserker mode”, was my overly anxious best friend seriously telling him that he was all cool with him showing us? Ghost looked relaxed, like he wasn’t worried at all.

Ghost. Not worried at all.

Surely that meant it wasn’t actually that bad.

“Okay, sure.” I smiled a little and folded my arms over my chest. “Show me.”

Gloam got incredibly tense.

“Are you sure you can control it, friend?” he asked Aury, stepping closer to me. His fingers twitched around the handle of his war hammer.

Aury looked at Ghost before answering. Seeming reassured by whatever he saw on Ghost’s face, he looked at Gloam again and nodded. “Yes. I would never hurt Rig. I promise.”

Gloam was still tense, but he gave a terse nod, even as he pulled me closer to him.

“You both have to turn around first, though,” Ghost said, and I snorted.

“Why, so it’s a big surprise?”

“Real funny, dork. No, because Aury only has one set of clothes out here and they’ll get torn to shreds if he changes while he’s wearing them. I don’t want anyone seeing my beastie naked.”

My eyebrows shot up at that, and I glanced at Gloam. “Uh… sure.”

We turned around, Gloam much slower and more reluctant to do it than I was. As we waited, listening to the sounds of clothes being shed behind us, he leaned closer.

“Be ready to run.” He gripped his war hammer tighter.

“Huh?” I shot him a fearful look. “Why?”

“Okay.” I jumped when Ghost’s cheerful voice rang out. “You can turn around. Don’t get freaked out, Rig.”

I wasn’t so sure I wanted to turn around now. But surely it couldn’t be that bad. Surely the whole clothes thing was just Ghost being overly cautious and wanting to fuss over his beastie. It wasn’t like Aury became a big, hulking, werewolf-like creature, was it?

A tiny smile on my mouth, I turned back around.

And promptly jerked back and fell flat on my ass. “*Whatthefuck*.”

The huge, hideous beastie let out a distorted bark at my sudden movement, his sunken black eyes homing in on me with terrifying intensity. He towered over us, over the RV and the borolesh, his skin a ghoulish, green-tinged colour and his wings so enormous that we were standing in their shadow.

Thick black veins wound over every part of him, and his limbs were long and claw tipped. But it was his mouth—his face—that made my vision go spotty with panic. That huge, protruding jaw filled with thick, sharp teeth looked like it could swallow me whole. It was big enough to swallow *Gloam* whole.

Gloam quickly helped me up, and I immediately huddled back into his big body. “Wh-wh-what—”

“Ruh—*Riiig*.”

I jumped at the sound of my name coming from that twisted mouth, in a rough, booming voice that was like a perverse imitation of Aury’s usual soft tone.

“H-holy fuck,” I breathed as I stared up at him, flinching when his big head cocked to look at Ghost.

My best friend gazed back lovingly at the terrifying creature. “You’re doing so good, Aury.”

Aury barked out another raspy sound and dropped down to his long forearms to snuffle at Ghost's hair. Ghost laughed and reached up to stroke the underside of that hideous gaping jaw. Aury's monstrous body shivered with delight, his protruding jawbone nuzzling over Ghost's head.

I let out a disbelieving breath.

He—That big, terrifying monster was almost acting… *playful*. Like a freaking dog wanting a fuss.

Gloam's arms were still wrapped around me tight, but they slowly loosened as he chuckled. "Remarkable."

Ghost pulled down his mask and beamed over at us with pride, petting the side of Aury's monstrous face.

"See? He's good." He looked up at Aury adoringly. "I'm so proud of you."

When he kissed one of Aury's huge teeth, I choked out an incredulous, slightly hysterical laugh.

"Are you ready to change back?" Ghost asked Aury, whose huge head dipped in a nod. "Okay, turn back around, you two."

We obeyed in silence. I gripped Gloam's hand too tight, blinking at the empty landscape with dazed eyes.

Moth had, uh… been telling the truth then.

Once Aury was dressed and we were able to turn back around, I stared at the familiar sweet face of the timid-looking rycke. He shot me a small, nervous smile, which I returned dazedly after a second.

We started walking again, with Gloam clicking at the borolesh and picking up the chain to continue helping them pull the RV. I fell into step beside Ghost, and Aury hesitantly made his way over to Gloam's side.

"You wanna tell me how the fuck you found that out?" I said, staring hard at Ghost when his face flushed.

He quickly fixed his mask back over his mouth with a nervous chuckle. "Sure. But you have to promise to hold all judgement until I've told you everything."

"Scout's honour." I held up two fingers, then three. Then two again. How many was it?

Ghost shot me a stern look. "And then you're telling me everything that's happened to you out here. Don't think I've forgotten that little mention of a fucking *cannibal cult.*"

I chuckled. "Sure."

It all felt so long ago. The giant death worm-slash-millipede. The cult and my very near brush with death—with being roasted alive and eaten. Even Mary. I was actually kind of excited that *I'd* have wild stories about the Wastes to tell *Ghost* for once.

But first, he told me everything that had happened since they set off for the Topeka camp. I got chills when I thought about an entire camp of raiders being slaughtered—by the sweet, black-eyed monster currently walking alongside Gloam, deep in conversation with him. I tried not to show it to Ghost.

I felt a little pang of sympathy for Moth when Ghost told me about the half-monster—the one who was desperately in love with him—going off to find Aury and bring him back. I hoped that meant Ghost would start being a little nicer to him from now on.

When he got to the part about Cutter pushing him off the wall, my breath caught in my throat.

"Holy shit, are you okay? Oh my god. He tried to kill you?" I pulled Ghost into my arms and squeezed him too tight, ignoring his muffled protests.

"I'm fine, dork." He extricated himself and shot me an amused look. "Aury caught me. And then…"

He took a deep breath. "Then the camp voted to banish Cutter to the Wastes."

"What?" I stared at him, tripping over my own feet as we walked. "Are you serious? That's never happened before."

"Yeah." Ghost's tone was grim. "But it was a fair vote. And we gave him food and a weapon. He wasn't totally helpless."

I swallowed. "What about his… his hand?" Or lack of hand, to put it better.

"Apollo checked the wound before he left. It was healing nicely and wasn't infected." Ghost shrugged. "He could've killed me, Rig."

"No, no, I'm not disagreeing with the camp's decision," I said quickly. "Honestly, I'll be glad to see the back of him. He was a nasty piece of shit, anyway."

"Yeah. He was." Ghost's voice lowered. "He hated Aury. So he probably would have hated Gloam too."

I bristled at that. How could *anyone* hate Gloam? He was so kind and smart and *totally fucking gorgeous.*

“So, you and the aytorin.” I could hear the smirk in Ghost’s voice as we walked. “How did *that* happen, huh?”

My mouth broke into a big, goofy grin behind my mask.

“Dunno. Just did.” Then I gurgled out a laugh. “I sucked him off in a forest while Mary was waiting back at the RV.”

“Jesus, Rig.” Ghost’s face went adorably pink, but I saw his eyes dart down to Gloam’s lower half, as though he’d somehow be able to check out the goods from behind.

He also eyed Gloam’s ass with appreciation just a touch longer than was appropriate, but I forgave him because it *was* a spectacular ass.

I leaned closer, slinging my arm around his shoulders.

“Does Aury have this big swell in the middle of his… you know… *cock*?” I blurted the last word loudly just to hear him splutter in shock. “Because fuck, it’s amazing. At first I didn’t think it was going to fit, but __”

Ghost cut me off with a choked sound, bright red now. “I’m not talking about this with you.”

I snorted with laughter as he shoved me away.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Ghost got a little frantic when I told him about the Herald and the cult, asking repeatedly if I was definitely alright, wanting to make sure that it hadn't traumatised me.

"I'm good." I slung an arm around his shoulders and gave him a squeeze. "Honestly, it kinda feels like it all happened to someone else now. But at least I have some wild stories to tell, finally. Cannibal monster cult *has* to be better than any of your or Lilac's stories about the Wastes."

Ghost snorted, jabbing my side with his elbow. "It's not a competition, dork."

"But if it was, I'd win." I let go of him and gestured at the RV. "Lucky you found us. You get a free ride back to camp. I took some stuff from Mary's place too. Booze, mainly."

He laughed. "Well, that should definitely help soften the blow of you returning to camp with not one, but *two* beasties in tow."

"I swear to god, they can all go fuck themselves if they say Gloam can't stay. We'll go start a new camp. Me, you, Aury, Gloam and Lilac."

Ghost shot me an amused look. "What if Lilac doesn't want to come with us?"

I snorted at that.

"Why would he not want to come with us?" I threw my back arm around his shoulders. "We're the best. Monsterfuckers and proud of it."

"Okay, okay." Ghost was red again. "I'm sure they'll let Gloam stay, anyway. Once you explain everything."

"They better, or they're not getting any of the good loot we brought." I grinned at him. "I'll show you when we stop for the night."

Ghost perked up as he eyed the RV. "Is there room for us all in there? It'd be nice not to sleep totally exposed out here for once."

Guilt made my stomach squirm, but I tried to push it away. "We'll make it work."

The grateful smile he shot me from behind his mask just made it worse. "Thanks."

I swallowed, watching my boots kick up dust as we walked.

“I really am sorry,” I said, my voice thick. “For not realising how much you hated going out into the Wastes. And for all the… what happened to you whenever you were gone from camp.”

He peered over at me. “How could you have realised if I didn’t tell you?”

“I don’t know, but I should have.” My shoulders hunched up miserably. “I was worried I’d die out here without getting to apologise.”

“Rig.” Ghost drew me to a stop and gave me a hug. “*I’m* sorry I wasn’t more honest with you. I should’ve told you. Out of everyone, I should have told *you*.”

I sniffled. “You’re gonna make me cry again.”

He choked out a laugh and pulled back, tugging on my arm to get me walking again. “Dork.”

Over the rest of the long journey back, we fell into a new routine. We still stopped each night when it started getting dark. Gloam would go off to hunt some dinner for me, Ghost and Seraph while Aury tended to the borolesh. They’d initially feared him, but had grown used to his presence.

It helped that Aury had spent days cautiously handfeeding them, determined to make them like him. I could tell that Gloam was still their favourite, but Aury came a close second, which I thought was adorable.

I thought it was even more adorable when Ghost told me in a hushed voice that Aury was thrilled to finally have a beastie friend. He and Gloam spent most days deep in conversation, walking side by side as they both helped the borolesh pull the RV and Seraph’s truck.

He would also sometimes lazily fly above us as we walked, keeping an eye out for any beasties or people who may have been approaching on the horizon. It was remarkably quiet, but even if it hadn’t been, I wasn’t all that scared of the Wastes anymore. It helped enormously that Gloam was now free of the chain and able to defend himself properly. Plus, we always had Aury’s “berserker” mode.

Aury was more playful now, less withdrawn, though Ghost was still the same—still my loveable, anxious, quiet best friend. A couple of times, Aury swooped down and snatched him up unexpectedly, laughing at his panicked

yelp. He'd settle on the roof of the RV and wrap himself tight around Ghost from behind, burying his face in his neck.

Gloam and I had already claimed the bed—and I told Ghost in no uncertain terms that he definitely did not want to sleep in those sheets, just to make him go red—but Aury's enormous wings wouldn't have fit in the tiny bedroom anyway. He and Ghost stayed in the living area, piling up all the sofa cushions and blankets on the small stretch of floor.

The close quarters and total lack of privacy for any of us meant there was absolutely no action on the road.

Well. Almost.

As we got into bed one night, I pressed a finger to my lips as I shot Gloam a salacious grin before kissing him, gliding my tongue against his cabled one. He managed to stay quiet as I kissed my way down his chest and stomach, despite the way his breath hitched and his muscles jumped under my lips.

He even managed to stay quiet as I fumbled with the lacing on the front of his pants, licking down all the new, smooth skin that was bared until his fat cock swung up against my cheek.

I was the one who gave us away when I snaked my tongue around the head of his cock, groaning at his taste and the feel of him in my mouth.

"Rig," Ghost's voice barked out immediately from the living room, making me jerk my head back guiltily. "I swear to god. We can hear *everything* in here. There may as well not be a door at all."

I cleared my throat, my voice sheepish when I called back, "Sure, man. Sorry."

Ghost huffed from the other room, and I heard Aury let out a little chuckle. Gloam's fingers curled through my hair as he looked down at me with a small smile.

I smiled back, then immediately dipped my head to suck him back into my mouth, wanting to grin when his eyes flared with surprised heat.

It was the slowest blowjob known to man. We had to be dead quiet. Any sudden movements would have shaken the bed, which I was sure would have easily been felt throughout the whole motorhome. So I took it slow—agonisingly slow, until we were both sweating and trembling with the need to come.

By the time Gloam shuddered and started coming in my mouth, his head craning back and teeth clenching to remain silent, all it took was one slow

stroke of my fist over my cock before I joined him.

A few times, Gloam and Aury would sit outside and talk well into the night while Ghost and I lounged in the RV.

“I call dibs on the record player,” I informed Ghost one night as we flicked through Mary’s old records.

He snorted.

“What are you, twelve? You can’t call dibs on things.” But then he paused. “But if we are, I get the nail polish.”

I chuckled. There were a few bottles lined neatly on a shelf, and I’d already seen Ghost eyeing them up.

“That reminds me, I grabbed a load more for you from Mary’s place.” I jerked my chin at the suitcase, which we hadn’t opened, and grinned at him. “I totally knew you’d want them.”

Ghost looked adorably excited. “You did? Thanks, Rig.”

When he found Mary’s stash of cigarettes and I said I didn’t want them, he beamed at me with pride, making me flush. I’d gone this long without nicotine now, and it felt wrong to damage my throat—and lungs—willingly after the trauma Gloam had gone through.

Another night, we finally unzipped the suitcase, cracked into one of Mary’s expensive bottles of gin and got stinking drunk. Gloam and Aury had to put us to bed when they came inside and found us.

Gloam rumbled with amusement when I got handsy as he undressed me for bed, gently removing my fumbling fingers from around his leather-encased package and telling me he would go and get me some water.

Ghost and I both regretted the decision the next day.

By the time the big, fortress-like wall of the camp came into view on the horizon, I was desperate for my big beastie, desperate to sleep in an adult-sized bed, and desperate to eat anything other than flame-roasted meat—not that I wasn’t grateful to Gloam for hunting for us.

I could see a small figure sitting on the edge of the camp wall as we approached, and when it scrambled to its feet at the sight of us, I caught a glimpse of a dark ponytail swinging with the movement and grinned.

I waved up at Lilac. He didn’t return it, instead sprinting for the hatch and disappearing down it. By the time we reached the shadow of the camp wall, he was jogging around the corner to meet us.

“You’re back.” He sounded a little out of breath. He cleared his throat and spoke again in his typical flat voice. “I’m guessing Mary isn’t in there.”

“No, Mary’s dead,” I said cheerfully, wanting to chuckle when his eyes flared for a split second—his only reaction to the news that he quickly masked.

He stared at me thoughtfully. “Did you kill her?”

“No, Gloam did once we got the cage off.” I gestured at my beastie. “His name is Gloam. He’s going to live here with us.”

I pulled off my mask, gripped his harness and went up on my toes to kiss his cheek. “He’s amazing.”

Gloam chuckled sheepishly while Lilac watched us, his expression entirely unsurprised.

“Don’t know how Anchor is going to react to that news.”

I grunted. “Yeah, well Anchor can—Anchor!”

I flushed and shuffled closer to Gloam, gripping his hand in mine as our camp leader appeared around the corner of the wall. Her eyes were uneasy as she took us all in, but when they fixed on me, I was shocked to see them go glassy with relief.

“You’re alive.” Ignoring Gloam entirely, she threw her arms around me and squeezed my neck so hard I choked.

“Yeah,” I managed to get out, having to let go of Gloam’s hand to pat her back once. “Back in one piece.”

“You’re such a stupid bastard.” She let go of me and gave me a weak shove. “I can’t believe you did that. I thought Ghost was going to murder me in my sleep. Or get Lilac to do it.”

Ghost snickered while Lilac quirked a brow, but both went totally still when Gloam spoke, his voice hard.

“Do not call him stupid.”

My breath caught as Anchor jumped, seeming to finally notice his towering form beside me. His eyes were flinty as he stared at her, his wide pupils intense—and just a little unnerving.

I pursed my lips together, trying not to smile as overwhelming gratitude for him filled my chest. He was still watching Anchor, his face tight with anger, and I felt a little mean for the rush of satisfaction that streaked through me. Even *Ghost* called me an idiot sometimes, though I knew he didn’t really mean it that way, and he didn’t know how much it stung.

Gloam never did. Gloam called me his clever firebrand.

“Sorry, I…” Anchor looked at me with wide eyes. “Sorry.”

I decided to brush past it.

“Well, it was worth it.” I beamed up at Gloam, tangling my fingers back through his. He gave them a gentle squeeze. “I got him free. And we freed all the other beasties. Mary’s gone.”

“Gone?” Anchor took a wary step back, eyes darting to Gloam’s war hammer. “Do you mean—”

“Dead,” Lilac supplied flatly. “Rig’s beastie killed his captor, it seems.”

“Right.” Anchor was still eyeing Gloam, who watched her back with his steady gaze, eyes calmer now.

“I—um… I’m glad to see you free.” She gestured at him with a nervous smile. “Without the cage on your head.”

Gloam dipped his head in a slight nod. “Thank you.”

Her eyes dropped to our linked hands, and she stared at them with furrowed brows for a long, tense moment.

Then she exhaled, her narrow shoulders sagging.

“Welcome to the family, I guess.” She gestured at the camp wall behind her. “We’ll have to take a vote with the camp on whether they’re happy for you to stay. It’s only fair.”

“Of course.” Gloam’s deep voice rumbled through me, making me grin like a fool. I’d get to hear that *forever*. “I understand.”

“Once we explain everything, they’ll be fine.” My optimism had returned in full force, and it knew no bounds. “Especially when they see what we’ve brought back.”

I suddenly remembered Seraph, still hidden in his cage on the pickup truck behind the RV. I winced, adding, “Well, maybe not all of it.”

Lilac side-eyed me while Anchor went still.

“What does that mean?” she asked suspiciously.

As if on cue, Seraph started screaming. He’d been quiet over the last few hours of our journey, as if he could sense we were reaching our final destination.

Lilac managed to contain the worst of his flinch, but Anchor jumped violently at the sound.

“What the hell is that.”

“Okay.” I looked at Gloam worriedly. “His name’s Seraph, and he was one of Mary’s captured beasties. But he’s—It’s not safe to free him just yet, so we, um… we brought him with us.”

Anchor’s wide, dark eyes slowly turned to me from where they’d been staring toward the back of the RV.

“You… you brought a beastie who’s too dangerous to set free… to the camp?”

“He can’t get out of his cage,” I rushed out. “And he’s—There’s something wrong with him. He needs our help.”

Anchor groaned, then flinched when Seraph let out another pained roar. “Jesus Christ, Rig.”

“We can leave him outside the camp wall for now.” Gloam’s deep voice was calm and steady. “I am going to read Mary’s journals to see if she wrote anything that can help. The military gave him to her, and they have kept him drugged, but we’re not sure yet whether the drugs help him or make him… worse.”

Anchor looked a little hesitant to answer back to Gloam. “I don’t… I don’t know how the others will react to you *and*… the other one. So maybe that’s a good idea.”

Gloam nodded. “I will come out here to care for him while we search for answers.”

“I’ll help,” I said quickly, pressing my cheek to his bicep. “The rest of the camp won’t have to worry about him. We’ll take care of it. He can’t get out of his cage, anyway.”

“Can we see him?” Lilac asked, just a hint of curiosity in his voice.

“Um.” I glanced at Gloam, who gave me a little nod. “Sure. He uh… he’s not pretty, though.”

Anchor and Lilac followed us to the back of the RV, Ghost and Aury coming up behind them. Anchor gasped when she saw Seraph. Lilac went totally still, but showed no reaction other than a twitch of his fingers beside the machete at his hip.

Seraph was completely losing it in his cage, screaming in fury and flinging his long body at each of the four sides. He froze for just a second when he spotted the new faces, then began to try and smash his way through the glass to get to them.

Anchor voice trembled when she spoke. “God, he’s…”

“He is in pain, I think.” Gloam gave the back of my head a soothing stroke. “And confused. He has been locked away for a while now. He probably has no idea what’s going on. Or what’s going to happen to him.”

Growing sad at the thought, I kissed Gloam’s chest. “We’ll help him.”

He smiled down at me.

Anchor groaned. “Great. We have two Rigs now, eager to help every damn creature they come across.”

Gloam chuckled, and I grinned up at him.

“My partner in crime,” I murmured, my grin widening when Gloam glanced down at me with an affectionate, knowing smile.

“Indeed. If anyone snoops around Mary’s house, they’ll think vandals got in before them.”

I snickered at the memory of Mary’s trashed room.

“We left the dresser intact, though,” I pointed out, knowing that he’d know full well why. Our little secret.

He gave me a big, fanged grin and reached up to cup my chin. “We did.”

“Oh my god, you two are as bad as them.” Anchor jerked a thumb at Ghost and Aury. The latter grinned mischievously, while Ghost went pink. “Come on, then, let’s get this camp vote over with so you can dote all over each other in peace. I’ll do my best to convince them to let you stay.”

She turned and headed back to camp, Ghost and Aury following behind her after Ghost shot me a thumbs up.

Lilac was still watching Seraph with calm eyes, despite the fact the beastie hadn’t stopped screaming or thrashing about in his cage.

“He’s something, right?” I said with a hesitant chuckle.

Lilac finally tore his eyes away from Seraph to look at me. “That’s one way of putting it.”

I gave him an uncertain smile and gestured at the camp. “Ready to head in?”

He looked at the RV. “Do you want me to help you bring anything in?”

“Oh. Yeah, that would be great. We brought stuff from Mary’s place.”

“Mhmm.” I saw him shoot a quick glance down at our hands, his brow quirking, but he said nothing.

Ghost had painted all our nails one evening when bored—even Gloam’s. He’d gone for a deep blue. To my utter mortification, I’d gotten a little choked up seeing my big beastie’s hand carefully cradled in my best friend’s as Ghost bent his head low, concentrating on doing a good job.

I’d picked red—obviously—while Aury had gone for a bright gold. Ghost still had the chipped remnants of pink on his nails—he told me Lilac had already stolen a few bottles from Mary’s RV, which made me snort—so he went over them in pink again.

We unhooked the borolesh, finally removing the thick harnesses from their backs, and I got a little choked up—yet again—as we watched them warble happily and nuzzle each other. The nearest one dipped its head to nudge Gloam, making him rumble out a deep laugh, before they turned and lumbered toward the forest.

"I hope they stay," I said to Gloam as we collected all the stuff we wanted to keep from the RV.

"I think they will."

I fixed my mask back over my mouth as I watched him climb up to the RV roof to unhook the generator.

Lilac helped us carry everything in, and by the time we got inside the camp, I could see all the other raiders gathered in the diner. They stared at us through the windows.

We dumped all the stuff outside my bedroom door, Lilac handing me my key with a tiny smile, before heading to the diner. I linked my fingers tightly with Gloam's, squeezing his hand hard. I could tell he was just a little nervous, and it made me want to kiss him senseless.

The diner was silent when we came through the door after Lilac. Moth was here, I noticed, and he straightened from his cocky slouch against the wall when Gloam stepped inside.

Gloam looked around solemnly at everyone, and when his eyes met Moth's, the pair locked and held gazes for a long moment. I wondered if Gloam could sense that he wasn't all human.

"So as I just said, Gloam here was held captive by Mary." Anchor's voice was steady. "Rig managed to free him—somehow—and he, uh… they're together now. So we're going to take a vote on whether Gloam can stay."

"What happened to Mary?" someone piped up.

I looked at Gloam, not sure what he wanted to tell them.

"I killed her," he said calmly. "I had to, to break her hold over me. But I am not bloodthirsty. If you allow me to stay, I will defend your camp with Aury, but I am not violent by nature."

Honestly, the one more likely to be a threat here was Aury. But Ghost had told me that only Lilac knew about Aury's other form. He'd seen it for himself when Cutter pushed Ghost off the camp wall. Even Anchor didn't know.

“So, uh… you two are a thing, huh?” Apollo shot me a wry smile. “Congrats, guys.”

I couldn’t contain the huge grin that spread across my face. I let go of Gloam’s hand to wrap both my arms around one of his, resting my masked cheek on his bicep. “Thanks.”

The raiders stared at us. I saw more than one pair of eyes dart incredulously down to the thick bulge in Gloam’s pants, prominent even when soft.

“Okay, so let’s take a vote.” Anchor looked around at the group. “Gloam and Rig have brought back lots of supplies.”

I wondered if she said it to sway them, but in the end I didn’t care, because the camp voted to let Gloam stay. I was practically bouncing on my toes as we left the diner, and Gloam shot me a fanged grin.

“Let me show you our room.” I pulled him in the direction of the motel. “We’re next door to Ghost and Aury.”

I pushed aside the stuff piled up outside and unlocked my door, holding it open wide with a grin for Gloam to duck through. I followed him in and closed it behind us, excitement twisting my stomach as I pulled off my mask.

“My love, this is…” Gloam stopped and looked around. “You have… a lot of things in here, Adam.”

“Huh?” I looked at the piles of stuff all over the floor. “Oh. Yeah. It’s all organised. Just stuff I’m working on.”

Gloam swallowed.

“Yes,” he said faintly.

“I can clear some of it,” I blurted, suddenly worried. Ghost had told me countless times that my room was a mess—that it was filled with junk. But this wasn’t *junk.* Not… per se. It *looked* like piles of junk, but everything was organised by, um, pile and I knew where it all was.

Gloam chuckled, turning to cup my chin. “It’s fine, my love.”

“I’ll clear some of it,” I repeated, reaching up to grip his harness with a grin. “But not right now.”

He must have missed my suggestive eyebrow waggle, because he chuckled again and leaned down to kiss me. Once. Briefly.

“No, not right now. We should sort out Seraph first.”

I deflated—literally—and let go of his harness. “Oh. Yeah. Sure.”

“Then I believe there are some things you promised me,” Gloam murmured, his thumb stroking over the pulse point in my neck, making me shiver. “I see a bed. And my mouth is free.”

I rallied—literally, my dick giving an eager twitch—as I realised exactly what he was referring to. The first time we’d fucked, when I told him I’d make him suck me off before I bent him over the bed and fucked him.

“I always fulfil my promises,” I told him with a lascivious grin. “I got the cage off, didn’t I?”

Gloam rumbled, cupping my face between his hands.

“Yes, my firebrand.” He leaned down to kiss me. “You did.”

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

We got Seraph's cage down from the truck and Gloam pushed it to the back edge of the camp wall, just amongst the trees at the edge of the forest.

"Will he be alright out here?" I asked worriedly.

Seraph was pacing with agitation in his cage, but no longer screaming for the time being. He seemed to always quieten down when stuff was happening around him. Like he was paying attention.

"If he can't get out of that cage, there is very little that can get in," Gloam told me as he and Aury heaved the RV to the side of Seraph's cage, shielding it from view of anyone who might have approached the camp from this side.

"We'll come and see him every day," Gloam said as he walked over to me, smoothing a hand over my wild hair. "It's not ideal, but I'll start reading Mary's journals soon. She hasn't had him for too long, so it shouldn't take much time for me to find anything. I'll work my way back through her *volumes*."

He shot me a little knowing grin. I may have gone on a mini rant while we were travelling back about what a self-centred asshole she was to have written literal *volumes* about her evil doings.

"Not yet, though." I reached up and gripped his harness. "We have other things to do first."

Aury chuckled as he passed us, heading back to the camp entrance. I couldn't bring myself to care about how obvious I was being, and I leaned up to kiss Gloam once before tugging him back into camp.

"Come on, let's go take a shower."

"A shower?"

I nodded. "I need one bad, and I want to see you wet and naked again. We don't have a bath here, though."

Gloam chuckled and waited patiently as I grabbed two towels from my room before I led him to the shower stalls tucked into the corner of the camp. Cat and I had built them years ago. He'd made the structure—he was a damn good carpenter—while I rigged up the water supply and shower heads.

They were all empty, which was lucky seeing as I planned on getting frisky with my beastie as we shared a stall. Although I quickly realised that it may not have been the best idea as we knocked shoulders and elbows while we both stripped down in the tiny, enclosed space. In the end, I had to let the shower door hang open just a little so we both had room to actually move. I poked my head out to make sure no one was around still.

The water was frigid, making me yelp as it trickled down my back. I'd brought my soap, so I quickly lathered my hands to start running them over Gloam's big, wet body.

He rumbled with pleasure, his cock already thickening and drifting up against his thigh. He took the soap and did the same to me, scrubbing down my body before carefully washing my hair.

"I really need to cut this mess off," I said as I stepped closer to smooth my soapy hands around his back and down to his ass.

Gloam chuckled, rinsing my head. "It's not a mess. It's beautiful."

"You love me—you have to say that." I leaned back to grin up at him, my chest getting hot and tight when he cupped my face and smoothed his thumb over my cheek with a little smile.

I jumped when Lilac's flat voice came from behind me before he could answer.

"Rig, I can see your bare ass."

I went bright red, but burst out laughing.

Leaning back to stick my head out of the shower stall, I called after him, "And it's the best one you'll ever see, pal, so enjoy it."

I heard him huff before he vanished around the corner toward the toilet stalls. Gloam chuckled and pulled me back into the shower, running soapy hands down my chest and sides.

He reached around and cupped my ass in his big hands, jerking me into his front.

"It is," he rumbled, leaning down to kiss me. I grinned against his mouth, wrapping wet arms around his neck.

"Pretty sure yours is the best, but I'm going to need a closer inspection to make sure," I said against his mouth, and Gloam laughed.

"I'm sure that's what is called a bad pick-up line, is it not?"

"I have better ones," I said eagerly. "How about—"

"You don't need any," Gloam rumbled and kissed me once more before pulling back. His cock bobbed with the movement, stiff and thick, making

my mouth water.

“We gotta get to the room.” I switched off the shower, desperate to lick and touch and kiss every inch of him.

I grabbed our towels, handing one to Gloam before drying off quickly. It was an incredibly tight fit in there, but I managed to struggle into my clothes, my hair dripping and immediately soaking the back of my shirt.

As Gloam tried to dress, we quickly realised how difficult it was to get leather—tight leather—back on over damp skin.

“We didn’t think this through,” Gloam grumbled as he struggled to pull his pants up.

I laughed, and the moment his boots were back on I grabbed his hand and dragged him out of the stall, back toward the motel. Spotting Aury and Ghost just about to head into their room, I let go of him to jog over.

“Ghost, Aury.” They stopped and turned, Aury giving me a sweet smile. “I have something really important to ask you.”

Ghost’s brows twitched together, and he took a step forward as he eyed me with concern. “What is it, Rig?”

“Okay.” I paused for dramatic effect as Gloam caught up, stopping beside me and trailing a hand down my arm to tangle our fingers back together.

“You know I love you both. And I’m really glad you’re together, and happy.”

Ghost’s expression grew wary. Aury cocked his head.

“But I had to listen to you two fucking like animals for weeks through the wall,” I told them solemnly.

The visible part of Ghost’s face flamed.

“So could you give us a few hours?” I gestured to Gloam, who had pursed his lips to try and fight off a smile. “Maybe go and do some gardening or hang out literally anywhere else in the camp, so we can… you know… fuck like animals?”

Aury bit his lip to hold back a chuckle as he looked at Ghost, who was still bright red and floundering.

“I—We didn’t know—”

“Hey, it’s cool.” I clasped his shoulder. “I’d just go sit on the camp wall to give you some privacy. I didn’t sit in there listening to you like a creeper, don’t worry.”

“We would be glad to give you some privacy.” Aury clasped Ghost’s shoulders from behind, dropping a kiss on the top of his head. “Come on, Ghost.”

“You like torturing your poor friend,” Gloam said with a chuckle as I unlocked our bedroom door.

“It’s just fun seeing him go bright red like that.” I hurriedly pushed Gloam inside, following him and locking the door behind us. “Okay, take those back off now.”

Gloam laughed, already undoing his pants and shoving them down his legs. While he pulled off his boots and left his pants crumpled on the floor, I stripped off in record time. But before I pressed myself up against his big naked body, I went still.

Staring at those boots.

“Will you put the boots back on?” I felt my face get hot even as the words were still blurting out of my mouth.

Gloam froze, but his cock jerked in reaction to the request. He let out a low, rumbling laugh. “Of course.”

He pulled them back on, then strode to stand beside the bed before turning to face me, his hands on his hips. Completely naked except for the boots and the harness around his shoulders.

I almost collapsed into a puddle of aroused goo on the floor.

“Holy shit.” My hand found my erection and gave it an eager stroke. Gloam’s wide pupils flashed at the sight.

“Where do you want me, firebrand?” He smirked at me, his fangs flashing. But then he added, “Actually…”

He beckoned me closer, and I felt like a cartoon character as I stumbled toward him with my tongue practically hanging out of my mouth.

“I have something to do first, don’t I?”

He gently shoved me back onto the bed, and I let out a little whimper as I bounced once on the mattress before he was crawling up my legs.

He placed one huge palm flat on my stomach, holding me down, and licked a wet stripe up the entire length of my throbbing cock.

“Oh fuck.” I gripped the sheets tight in my fists, head craning back as he lapped at my balls with a low rumble.

He sucked one into his mouth, then the other, making me shake as my teeth clenched together. When he pressed his tongue hard into the seam, against the very root of my cock, my hips gave a helpless jerk as I moaned.

“Such a beautiful cock,” he murmured as he licked back up the length of it. His big hand slid down to circle its base as he looked up at me through his lashes. “Are you going to fuck me well with this, Adam?”

I nodded frantically like one of those old bobbleheads people stuck to the dash of their car, already panting hard between parted lips as I stared down at him.

“I know you will.” Gloam kissed the leaking tip of my cock—a deep, wet kiss, his cabled tongue circling and stroking that sensitive V on the underside.

“Oh my god,” I croaked, my knees jerking open wider as my hips tilted to get closer to his mouth. “Y-you can’t deepthroat me this time, though. I’ll c-come straight away.”

I regretted the words as soon as they left me, but it was true. I was already too desperate for him, my cock harder than steel and straining against his slurping lips as he sucked wetly on the head.

He shot me a mischievous look before his mouth sank deeper, just shy of lodging my head in his throat. He sucked slowly all the way back up, my ass lifting off the bed to try and chase the hot, wet suction.

“F-fuck, okay.” I shook my head weakly on the bed, my chest heaving. “E-enough. I’m too close.”

Gloam rumbled in amusement, but before rising up he pushed on the backs of my thighs and gave my hole a sudden slurping lick. I cried out, trembling as my hips jerked.

“You’re gonna kill me,” I croaked as I scrambled up and walked on shaky legs to the end of the bed.

Gloam stayed where he was, on all fours, shooting me a grin over his shoulder.

My breath left me in a rush at the sight of him. The ink-stained back of his head, those nubby horns just peeking up. His impossibly wide shoulders framed by that leather harness. The bulge of his arms as he held himself up. The taper of his waist. The long line of his elegant spine.

Those boots.

I gulped, staring at his strong legs and thick thighs. And his ass.

Fuck. That ass.

I decided then and there that I was *definitely* going to start trusting my intuition more. Because all those weeks ago, when I’d sat on the camp wall staring at Gloam and decided he had to have a biteable ass under those

leather pants, I'd been right. I'd been absolutely, one hundred percent correct.

It was rounded, with little twin dimples at the base of his spine, and his thighs were spread just enough for me to see the furrow between his cheeks. His dark balls hung, smooth and heavy between his legs. The drooling tip of his cock was visible, the thick weight of it pointing it down toward the bed despite how hard it was.

I fell to my knees behind him like I was going to worship him. Which I was. I smoothed my hands up his thighs to his ass, giving the firm cheeks a squeeze. Gloam rumbled with pleasure, his thighs sliding open wider until the head of his cock brushed the sheets. He gasped, hips rocking helplessly into the friction.

"Fuck," I croaked, watching his sac tighten as his balls rose from the feel. I raised a trembling hand and cupped them, letting out a hard breath when Gloam moaned.

I palmed his ass again, but didn't bite it just yet. First I leaned in and kissed it softly, across one smooth, rounded cheek. Then I turned my head and grazed my teeth gently over the other. Gloam jerked and huffed out a shuddery breath, all the muscles in his back tensing and flexing.

Hands splaying on his firm cheeks, I spread his ass wide and groaned at the sight before me. His pucker was tiny, a darker shade of grey than the surrounding skin, and it was already glistening slightly with his slick. My mouth watered, but rather than diving right in, I kissed the inner curve of one cheek, then the other, knowing he could feel the whisper of my breath over his hole.

"Adam," he rasped, shuddering as his ass cheeks tensed against my hands.

Groaning at the sound of my name in that low voice, I leaned in and gave his hole a soft, wet lick. Then another, buoyed by the shaky gasp that escaped Gloam. I swirled my tongue, moaning at the feel of him twitching in reaction.

When I carefully pushed the tip inside, the taste of his sweet slickness filled my mouth. I couldn't stop the guttural groan that broke from my chest, and I pushed my tongue as deep as it would go before pulling back and licking his hole feverishly.

I was moaning almost as much as Gloam. God, this was addictive. I ate his ass frantically, like a rabid beast, spit and slick dripping down his

smooth taint and over his balls. Gloam was trembling. Hard, desperate sounds escaped him in a constant flow, his hands fisting on the bed.

When I sucked, he shook wildly and let out a rough bellow.

My own dick was so damn hard it was agony. I reached down and gave myself a single stroke, but the action made me shudder so hard, already on the brink of an orgasm, that I pulled my shaking hand away.

But I couldn't *not* touch myself. I was too aroused from doing this. Moaning into Gloam's ass, I cupped my own balls and gave them a gentle squeeze. At the same time, I slid my tongue and lips down his taint to his sac, feeling the smooth stretch of skin contract from the sensation. As I sucked, I played with my own nuts until they were hard and tight, hugging the base of my dick just like Gloam's were. Lapping at his big balls, I slid my hand back until the pad of my middle finger traced softly around my rim, still a little wet from Gloam's slurping lick.

My moan against Gloam's sac was garbled and frantic. I stroked my hole needily as I licked up to his ass and buried my tongue back in it. Pre-cum slid down my achingly stiff cock, making me shudder hard at the feel. Balls aching, I slid my hand forward to palm them again, my body spasming at the fuzzy pleasure that shot up my cock. My hips jerked helplessly as I whimpered into Gloam's ass.

"Adam," he gasped, making me moan desperately and suck on his softening hole.

I stroked my own hole again, my finger moving faster and faster as I imagined the pleasure he was feeling, as I listened to him strain out breathless, gravelly sounds while I tongued him. When my whole body spasmed and my dick surged, a split second away from coming, I pulled my shaking hand away and lifted it to blindly seek out his cock.

We both moaned loudly when I found it. It was agonisingly stiff, hanging between Gloam's spread thighs, fat and heavy. The head was drooling pre-cum, and I played with the weeping tip with my fingers until he was shuddering.

"Sh-shit, I need to fuck you." I rose to my feet, shaking wildly.

"*Yes*, Adam," Gloam rumbled, already rocking his hips back. His big body trembled, and he moaned low when I slid my cock between his cheeks.

I couldn't wait any longer. He hadn't needed any prep before, and I trusted he'd tell me if he did. But he was already pushing back, urging me

to get my dick inside him.

I grasped the base in a shaking fist and aimed the head at his hole, my knees going weak when it met slick warmth. I carefully worked the tip inside, letting out a trembling breath at the tight, slick heat of him.

Gloam moaned and pushed back, his ass engulfing my cock in one go. My entire body spasmed from the pleasure.

“Oh my god.” My hands scrabbled over his ass, finally grabbing on tight as my hips pulled back and jerked forward again.

Gloam snarled, rocking back again, setting the pace. It was hard and frantic, and I had to plant my feet hard into the floor to counter the weight of his big body as it slammed back into me. I was sweating, pounding my cock inside him as hard as I could. The sound of our bodies smacking together filled the small room.

“Yes, Adam.” Gloam let out a trembling moan as his ass tightened around my thrusting dick. “Your cock feels perfect. So good.”

He shuddered, the muscles in his back jumping as he rocked back faster and faster, fucking himself on my cock. “So good—You’re—It’s making me—”

I gasped in pleasure when he shook and cried out, his head tipping back and his ass constricting and pulsing around my agonisingly sensitive dick. Those cabled ridges inside him massaged my length and squeezed my tip, and the orgasm shot up my cock almost painfully fast, my balls wrenching up.

“Fuck,” I gasped, my hips jerking as I emptied inside him in long spurts. “Fuck, f-fuck—”

Gloam shuddered with pleasure, still rocking his hips back even as the tension drained from the bulging muscles in his shoulders and arms.

My legs were shaking when I finally eased my cock out, and it pulsed again at the sight of Gloam’s thick, trembling thighs and the long thread of cum connecting his softening cock to the bed. There was a thick puddle beneath him. As I stared, Gloam’s hole clenched and my cum dribbled out, sliding down his smooth taint to his sac.

“Oh my god.”

Before, I could stop myself, I was thudding to my knees and reaching between his thighs to pull his cock back until I could lick the head clean. Gloam jerked and gritted out a rough sound, then let out a long, shuddery moan as I licked over his drained balls to his leaking hole. His upper body

collapsed onto the bed. He moaned into the sheets, his big body trembling as I licked his hole clean, groaning at the combined taste of us.

"Adam," he rasped, his voice muffled.

I finally pulled back and just about managed to stumble around to collapse on the bed, half on top of him.

"I can't move," I mumbled into his shoulder, my leg slinging over his rounded ass when he let the rest of his body relax on the bed.

He chuckled, still breathing fast as he eased around to face me and pull me tight against his front.

"I think you deserve a long sleep after that." He stroked my hair back from my damp, flushed face and pressed a kiss to my forehead.

I snorted, even as my eyes drifted shut. "I barely did any of the work. You're a total power bottom, you know that?"

Gloam stilled, then rumbled out a low laugh. "That is a term I haven't come across before."

"Well that's what you are." I nestled closer until my nose was pressed to the base of his throat. I breathed in his metal-tinged scent, my entire body melting into the bed.

"You're amazing," I mumbled, already half-asleep.

Gloam chuckled, his big hand cupping the back of my head.

"No. I am not the amazing one." He pressed a kiss to the top of my head, nuzzling his flat nose into my hair. "Sleep now, Adam. I love you."

My lips pulled up into a lazy smile. "I love you too."

I only just managed to get the words out before I fell into the deepest sleep of my life.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

“Gloam seems to be settling in well.”

Lilac, Ghost and I were sitting side by side on the camp wall, watching my big beastie try and patiently talk to an agitated, screaming Seraph in his cage down below.

I couldn’t contain my dreamy sigh as I answered Lilac. “Yeah. It’s great.”

Ghost chuckled and nudged me gently with his elbow.

“Are you any closer to figuring out what’s wrong with Seraph?” he asked.

Lilac looked up from the little wooden figurine he was carving to watch as Seraph smashed his body into all four sides of his cage. My lips pulled down at the sight. Surely that had to hurt him.

“Not yet. Gloam’s trying to get through to him. He’s pretty sure he can understand us. He hasn’t started reading Mary’s journals yet.” I flushed, feeling the need to defend him. “He will—we want to help him—but it’s… He just needs a break from her first.”

Lilac grunted. “Don’t blame him. I wouldn’t want to read the scribblings of an evil woman who hunted and captured beasties.”

“You still have time.” Ghost shot me a small smile beneath his mask. “And who knows—maybe Gloam will find out that the drug is actually the thing making him worse, and he gets better on his own when you run out?”

I exhaled. “Yeah. Hopefully.”

I got uneasy when I thought about why the military had been drugging Seraph. My guess was that it was to make him stronger. More violent and rabid, so they could use him as a weapon, but it hadn’t worked the way they’d hoped.

Maybe by the time they gave him to Mary, he was too dependent on the drug to take him off it. Or maybe Mary asked if she could keep him on it so he would put on a good show when she shoved him in the fighting cage with her other beasties.

We only had a limited supply of the drug, so best case scenario would be that he improved once we ran out. If he didn’t… I had no idea what would happen.

“It feels like the most humane thing would be for me to kill him,” Lilac said in a low murmur, making my gut clench.

“You might have to,” Ghost muttered, his blue eyes tight as he watched Seraph slam his shoulders against the glass repeatedly.

“Gloam will figure it out,” I said quickly. “He’s so smart. He’ll find out what’s wrong and how to fix it.”

“Or you will.” Ghost nudged me with his elbow again, giving me a smile. “You figured out how to free him.”

“Mmm.” My tone was doubtful. “Pretty sure that was a fluke.”

Ghost snorted while Lilac side-eyed me. “A fluke. Sure.”

We watched as Aury appeared below, joining Gloam beside Seraph’s cage. The beastie quieted for a few moments, like he always did when Aury was near, before he started screaming again.

“He’s in pain,” Lilac said flatly, back to his whittling.

I glanced at him. We’d suspected that. “How do you know?”

“I’ve heard enough monsters screaming in pain,” was all he said with just as little inflection, which made me swallow nervously.

“Maybe we should stop giving him the drug for a while to see what happens.” I peered anxiously down at the monsters.

“I don’t think you should do anything differently until Gloam reads the journals,” Ghost said, as pragmatic and cautious as ever. “If Mary documented so much of her life, she’s sure to have written down the details of when the military gave him to her.”

“Yeah,” I said distractedly, my fingers twitching with the need to roll a cigarette, to do something with my hands to lessen my nerves.

I didn’t smoke anymore, but Lilac had “accidentally” killed my tobacco plants anyway.

“Oops, forgot about them,” was all he’d said when I finally noticed them, brittle and dead in their pots. He was such a dirty liar.

He’d gifted us an orchid to replace them, which delighted Gloam. He tended to that thing meticulously, and I could have sworn I saw Lilac’s eyes narrow with envy when Gloam showed him how much the plant was already flourishing under his care.

Some of the other raiders were still wary of Gloam—hell, some of them were still wary of Aury—but he was settling in nicely. Honestly, I didn’t think he gave a shit if some of them didn’t like him. He was too sure of

himself—which I found *ridiculously* hot—and he was happy spending time with me, Ghost and Aury. And sometimes Lilac.

I had already told Lilac he'd be coming with us to make a new camp if sentiment changed among the other raiders. He'd simply quirked a brow, which I took to mean a big, fat yes in Lilac speak. I was pretty sure, anyway. I liked to go for the more positive outlook.

Gloam and Aury had become, like, best friends, which just made me want to blubber at how cute they were. When I'd teased Gloam about it—about being best friends with the 'terrifying' rycke—he'd cupped my chin and told me *I* was his best friend, which had made me jump up and wrap all my limbs around his big body while he laughed.

He *was* my best friend. My best person. Ghost would always be my best human friend—practically my brother—but me and Gloam… we just *fit*. He said I made him feel younger and less dogged down by the brutal years he had experienced at the hands of the Herald and then Mary. He said I was going to wear him out with my boundless energy and eagerness for everything, but he said it with a teasing smile before kissing me senseless and dragging me to bed.

In bed, *he* was the eager one. The one with all the energy—and stamina. Most nights, I collapsed beside him after we were finally done—which took a while—and dropped into the sleep of the dead before the sweat had even cooled on my body.

He wore the boots for me whenever I asked. Which was often.

The scars on his back and under his jaw had healed well, but were still visible, the skin a lighter grey and more tender-looking. Aury had asked what had happened to him one night when we were sitting in a quiet corner of the camp under the solar fairy lights I'd strung up everywhere. Ghost and I had been drinking several of the pre-mixed cocktail cans I'd taken from the fridge at Mary's place, and my body was loose and relaxed as I leaned back against Gloam in the cradle of his lap.

But I'd gone tense when he recounted the whole story to Ghost and Aury. The rycke's eyes had grown glassy at hearing what Gloam had gone through, and he'd reached out and gripped Gloam's arm.

"Blood isn't everything," he'd said. "You have found your own people now."

He knew better than anyone. He'd been all alone for his entire life until he found us.

Gloam and Aury talked constantly, and Gloam told me that he wanted to help Aury document the history of the rycke, if only to help purge some of the memories of an entire race that crowded Aury's brain.

Ghost had told me everything, and I had never been more glad of the fact that we decided to help him that day we came across him, bound and helpless, in the ruined military base.

Life was, for lack of a better word, good. No—it was fucking amazing. I would've never guessed that this would be where I ended up when I was shoved out of those city gates at seventeen and watched the huge weight of them slam shut behind me, my eyes already filling with tears as I got a final glimpse of my sobbing mother. I would've never guessed that I'd find a home and a family out here, with my best friend by my side and my big, perfect beastie wrapped tight around me.

I actually felt sad for all the city humans, still living in squalor and poverty, weighed down every day by the military's constant fearmongering messages that the Wastes were a lawless, dangerous place and all the monsters would tear the skin off your bones the moment they saw you.

I still remembered the PSAs that would come on our crappy, flickering TV during every ad break between reruns of pre-apocalypse sitcoms. '*Stay safe. Stay in the cities.*' Even though I was pretty sure the cities were more dangerous and lawless than the Wastes were. I'd seen for myself how awful humans could be, especially in big groups.

I often wondered if Samson would ever make it out of the Herald's cult.

Part of me desperately wanted to go and help him. Help any of the people there who wanted to get free. But they all had the mark, Samson had told me, which prevented them from even crossing the mall's perimeter somehow.

Besides, Gloam's brothers were there. His terrible, backstabbing brothers who had caused all of his pain. I didn't want Gloam going anywhere near them—especially because they knew how to get him back under the Herald's control. They knew his true name.

I still remembered the words I'd had to say to help free him. I knew I'd always remember them—I'd always be ready to say them, if his brothers or the Herald ever showed up to try and take him back. I'd die to make sure he stayed free.

I was jolted out of my thoughts when Aury's dark wings and mischievous face suddenly popped up directly in front of Ghost, long

fingers curling around the edge of the metal container either side of his legs. He was hovering at the top of the camp wall, his big, ragged wings lazily flapping.

"Hello." He grinned and swooped up to tug Ghost's mask down just long enough to kiss him.

Ghost's face flushed with pleasure as he fixed his mask back over his mouth.

"Hi," he said, slightly breathless, as if the mere sight of his beastie still got him every time.

I chuckled and looked down at Gloam, who waved up at me with a big, fanged grin. I was already grinning madly as I waved back, scrambling to my feet now that he was done with Seraph.

Lilac huffed behind me. "I'll finish up your shift keeping watch, then."

"Oh." I paused only briefly to turn around. "Cool, thanks Lilac."

I heard him snort as I hurried to the hatch, eager to meet Gloam when he made it back inside the camp.

"How was he today?" I asked after leaning up to give him a kiss, even though I'd seen for myself that Seraph didn't appear any different—or better.

"The same," Gloam rumbled, cupping my chin and dropping another kiss on my head. "I will start reading Mary's journals soon."

I gave his hand a sympathetic squeeze as we walked toward the motel. "Maybe I can read them so you don't have to."

"I don't mind doing it, my love."

We stepped into our room, Gloam shutting the door behind him as I grumbled, "You've had enough Mary to last a lifetime. Several lifetimes."

Gloam chuckled as he made his way toward the suitcase we'd brought back with us. It was almost empty now, the only things left in it were Mary's stupid journals. I flushed as he carefully picked his way over a heap of wires to reach it. I'd pushed all my organised piles of stuff to the sides of the room, so he had space to move around, but I *was* going to sort through it and clear it all up.

Just as soon as we could spend more than five minutes together in here without tearing each other's clothes off.

I pulled off my mask and hurried forward as Gloam unzipped the suitcase to get Mary's journals. "Wait, not yet."

He paused, pulling his hand back as he turned his head to look at me. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong.” I reached up to grip onto his harness, curling my fingers under the leather as I shot him a salacious grin. “Just wonderin’ if you wanted to fool around before you get bogged down with thoughts of that asshole.”

Gloam stilled, then chuckled.

“We’ve barely been out of bed for a few hours,” he rumbled, but he was already picking me up and carrying me over to it.

“I know, but I can’t get enough of you.” I rained kisses all over his face and neck before he deposited me on the bed and loomed over me, hands on his hips. “And I showered. I’m squeaky clean, and I’d really like to sit on your face. Or for you to sit on mine. I’m not bothered about which way around we do it.”

Gloam burst out laughing, and I felt it in the pit of my stomach.

“I am fairly sure I’d crush you, my firebrand,” he said as he followed me down, holding himself up on bulging arms above me.

I grinned up at him, wrapping my arms around his neck. “One way to find out.”

He chuckled, but I could feel his thick cock filling out where it pressed against mine. “I will keep a hand close to your head, so you can squeeze it if you want to stop. Or can’t breathe.”

I burst out laughing. “Oh right, okay, so we’re definitely doing it that way around, are we? I see you’re already on board with the idea.”

He rumbled, leaning down to kiss me. “You shouldn’t be so good at it if you don’t want me to crave it at every opportunity.”

I bit my lip, heated pride filling every inch of me. I still couldn’t quite believe that I managed to make my big, steadfast beastie go wild with pleasure and lose all control when we had sex.

He loved bottoming the most, and more often than not set the pace. The sight of his wideset eyes flashing with arousal and fanged teeth clenching together to hold back the loudest of his bellows always made me ride the razor’s edge of orgasm until he finally started coming, and I could let go and join him.

“Well then.” I grinned up at him, sliding my hands down his muscular back to pat his firm ass. “Best take these off and climb on up.”

Gloam chuckled, leaning down to nuzzle my neck. “I’ll leave the boots on.”

I huffed. “That’s a given.”

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GLOAM

I still often expected to feel the sharp edge of the cage cutting into the back of my neck when I turned my head. The weight of it pressing hard into the top of my skull, rubbing painfully at my horns.

Every time I remembered it was gone, I wanted to find Adam and cling to him. Enfold his body in my arms and never let go.

Life had felt so very bleak for so long.

Aside from the three of us, no other aytorin had crossed over into this world, and the rest of our kind back in our ruined city had expected us to be gone for many years as we learned and documented all that we could about this new place. Only my brothers knew what had become of me, and they would never leave the Herald to return anyway.

The pain of their betrayal hadn't faded. I suspected it never would. But it was bearable, and I had something better now. Something that eclipsed any lingering grief for the two siblings I had grown with in our father's body, who had subjected me to the torment I'd gone through.

Adam had saved me and brought me into his life—his world—with unflinching compassion and a dogged refusal to accept anything less than what he had set out to do. This sweet, selfless human had appeared from nowhere and risked his life for me—a creature he did not know, who most assumed was as terrible as my captor had been, or at the very least a mindless, violent thing that killed on command.

But then, I had been exactly that until he saved me. At least Mary's concern had been capturing monsters to keep locked away rather than killing any she came across, but she still made me do terrible things. Things for which I would carry the guilt for the rest of my life.

I couldn't help but feel like I caused my own downfall. That I had been weak and naïve to assume it was a mere impartial interest on my brother's

part when we heard about a lone salyik luring humans to form a secretive group somewhere in the deserted stretch of land we had been roaming.

At the request of Metelimus, who claimed it would be a fascinating glimpse into how new societies formed after cataclysmic events had disrupted ingrained ways of life, we had set out to find them. And when we found them, Metelimus had immediately been sucked in by the Herald's awful plans. Neminos joined them both soon after.

I had spent many, many days trying to show them what the Herald was really doing. I had been reluctant to leave them, scared of what the Herald would make them do. Scared to be without them, for the first time in my life. Scared of the fervent gleam in their eyes as they watched humans submit to the power of the Herald.

Aytorin did not crave power. We craved knowledge. Understanding. Something had corrupted my brothers. I didn't know if this thirst had sat long dormant inside them, or if something had sparked to life when they saw how easily humans could be controlled.

In the end, I'd known I needed to get away. I knew I couldn't be a part of what they were creating.

But before I could leave, they had accosted me one night. I had stupidly told them that I did not agree with what was happening in that awful place, and that I planned on leaving.

My brothers had held me down—only the strength of two aytorin was enough to overpower me—while Metelimus murmured the words to control me for the Herald to repeat. They had been the only two beings in existence who had known my true name, who'd had the means to control me completely, and they had given that power-hungry salyik the key.

The despair and humiliating indignity of it still burned hot in my chest, a fire that would never be quenched. The utter hopelessness I had felt as the Herald ordered me to stay still and silent so my brothers could pierce my mouth with thick rings of metal, uncaring when the sparks burned my tongue and lips as they welded them together, and then to the inside of the cage.

I hadn't been able to make a sound as they sealed my head inside, but my mind had been screaming out at the utter betrayal and devastation. At the realisation that I was completely powerless, and there was no way out.

It wasn't truly known where the weakness of our kind had come from. Why we could be forced under another's control with just our true names.

Some believed it was the payment that old, forgotten gods had forced us to make in exchange for our wealth of knowledge—our ability to absorb vast amounts of languages and information without strain on our minds.

Wherever it had originated, our true names had been a closely guarded secret for eons. We shared them only with our most trusted, as a display of unbreaking loyalty and the bond that held blood-linked siblings together. I was certain that what had happened to me was unprecedented.

That my brothers had betrayed me so completely to follow the ramblings of a power-mad salyik would have been unthinkable to my kind. Until it happened.

I had thought my life could get no worse, watching desperate humans search for any meaning they could and fall prey to the Herald's twisted ideology. Watching humans consume their own kind, their eyes gleaming with depraved hunger behind their masks as they witnessed another unwilling coal get burned alive, knowing they would soon be feasting on flesh.

I was the one the Herald ordered to impale the humans who refused their "gift" on the spit. I could still remember the feel of their flesh giving, their organs rupturing as they were pierced by the metal. They had screamed. Scratched at me. Begged me to stop. I'd been unable to say a word.

Their blood coated my hands, and it was a stain I knew I'd never get off. I had felt my mind fracturing each time I'd been forced to hoist a skewered, half-dead human over that burning pit of coals while my brothers and the Herald watched impassively.

Then Mary had come with her idea to draw in the military, and the Herald had given me to her as her unwilling protector.

My brothers obeyed without question when Mary asked them to put the rings through my spine, and the Herald ordered them to do it. They were under no compulsion. They acted of their own free will.

I'd had no order to stay silent that time, so I had cried out in agony as they pierced my spine with the metal, burning me yet again when they welded them shut. I was ashamed now that I had made a single sound. In my head, I had been pleading with them to stop, much like the humans had pled with me. I had silently begged them to remember that I was *theirs*. Their blood. Their brother.

Neither of them stopped. Neither of them spoke. And neither of them reacted when Mary led me away and chained me to the side of her

motorhome. She had the borolesh already by then, and they had shown me more sympathy in their soft warbles and sad, drooping eyes than my brothers had.

My brothers never spoke to me when I had to go back to the cult with Mary, and soon my grief gave way to despair. Hopeless despair, because I could never get free.

Until Adam.

He had appeared that day, whispering frantic words about helping me. Freeing me. This human who didn't know me, whose uneasy fear I could feel even as he promised to help.

I had ached with the desire to fall to my knees and beg him. I'd craved interaction with another, something I'd been denied for years, but guilt had warred with the longing inside me because of the risk he put himself at every time he left the camp walls to speak to me. So I had tried to deter him, even though inside I had been pleading with him to stay. But I hadn't succeeded. My little firebrand would not be deterred.

I wasn't entirely sure at what point I fell in love with him. Perhaps it was the first time we touched intimately. Perhaps it was when Mary ordered me to chase him down and bring him back so she could deposit him with the Herald and make him choose whether he wanted to live a life of cannibalistic subservience or die an agonising death. Perhaps it was the moment I saw him being taken away from me by one of the Herald's followers, and I'd been so sure I would never be able to touch him again, or hear his voice, or see his dear, messy handwriting as we wrote secret words in our notebook.

Perhaps it was that very first night we spent together out in the Wastes after leaving the camp, when he had shivered in his sleeping bag on the hard ground, having left behind everything he knew to help me.

I still wasn't sure how he'd done it. How he had freed me—because it had been all him, as much as he might have protested that fact. The compulsion to *protect Mary from danger* should have forced me to stop him removing the cage—because *I* was the danger to her when that chain of events was set into motion.

Perhaps that had been why. Adam had been no threat to her. His actions had been entirely selfless. Pure. All he had wanted was to see me free. He'd had no desire to hurt Mary. He hadn't even considered the fact that I might have had to kill her. It made me love him even more than I already did.

I had struggled long into the night to get the words down for Adam to say. My own name—that I could write freely. It was mine, even if it had been stolen from me. But the rest had taken me hours. Long, agonising hours while Adam slept, my hand and fingers spasming painfully around the pencil.

But I had done it. Somehow, I had gotten them down. I'd kept his face in my mind. His sweet, beautiful face. The way he'd wept against me when he saw what had been done to me beneath the cage. The words he'd said to me before he reluctantly enclosed my head back inside it. He was the only one who would have been able to free me. I knew that with certainty.

He was all I wanted. The rest—the thirst to discover more about this world, the desire to hoard its words and knowledge—didn't matter anymore. He was who I had come here for. I just hadn't known it at the time.

At first, the realisation that I would outlive him had made my insides feel like they were dying. But when the panic faded, I remembered the place where we could go to tether our lives and stay together for the rest of our days.

Thousands of years ago—long before I was born—one of our Matriarchs had fallen in love with a telyth, whose lifespans were far longer than ours. They had travelled to the Caen an Sin to receive the mabs' gift—to align their lifetimes and never have to be without one another.

We didn't know what had become of them, aside from a few scribbled passages in old tomes about them settling on an island to the southwest and having young of their own. Which surely meant the tether had worked.

Which meant it may work with a human.

I was happy to live here with Adam—in his camp in this world—but perhaps one day we could travel through the tear to the Caen an Sin. I would broach it with him soon, but first I wanted him to have time to settle back into his life. To give his mind a rest after all the stress and fear he had gone through.

After a week or so at the camp, Adam and I moved into the next bedroom along from his. Partly because I could not handle his piles of junk—which he assured me were organised somehow—but mainly because it gave all of us more privacy. The walls here were thin, particularly to mine and Aury's ears, and Adam and I were still insatiable for each other. I suspected that would never fade. I craved him constantly.

The other raiders had welcomed me uneasily to the camp. Most still avoided me, but that didn't bother me. I didn't need their companionship. I wanted only Adam's.

The half-human was still here. He watched the rycke's mate with hungry eyes when he thought no one was looking.

He avoided me too.

I didn't try to approach him. His secrets would come out eventually, but they were not mine to tell, so I said nothing—not even to Adam. He didn't need that worry.

I sat with Seraph most days, trying to speak to him, which I had never been able to do before. Nothing soothed him. He was in constant agony, thrashing and screaming, though I wasn't sure if he was actually trying to escape his cage or just expressing his pain in the only way he knew how.

Guilt churned in me with each day that I couldn't bring myself to open Mary's journals and start searching for answers. I would soon. I wanted to help him, and I knew Adam did too. But I wanted to enjoy this peace with my little firebrand first. To bask in it a little longer before I forced my mind to return to that time.

Each day with Adam was a joy. His youthful exuberance chased away the ache of what had happened to me, helped me push away the gnawing fear that my brothers or the Herald would find me and overpower me again.

But I knew Adam would never let them. He knew my true name. He knew the words to help me. He still called me Gloam, which was what I had always gone by, but sometimes when we were wrapped around each other in the dark, he would whisper my true name to me just to remind me that he would never forget it.

We had been at the camp for two weeks when I finally forced myself to sit at the tiny table in our room—this one mercifully free of junk—to start reading Mary's journals.

I exhaled, staring down at the innocuous leather book that contained the fetid thoughts of my captor. My mind was thankfully unharmed by what she and the others—the Herald and my siblings—had put me through, but I was still reluctant to place myself inside her head, even if only for a short time.

But I needed to. Seraph was an unwitting pawn in the games of her and the military, and he had no one else. He couldn't spend the rest of his life in a cage, but he was too rabid—too tortured—to let free yet. We needed to find answers in Mary's words.

Before I could even open the first journal, Adam burst through the door.

"There you are." He crossed the room, pulling off his mask and dropping himself down sideways into my lap. "I missed you."

I chuckled, smoothing a hand through his still wild hair. "We've only been apart for a few hours, my firebrand. But I missed you too."

I always missed him when he wasn't by my side.

He had gone to fix something in the kitchen at the request of the two raiders who spent most of their time in there—Daisy and Bo. I liked them both immensely. Daisy had been astonished when I spoke to her in fluent Korean, going stock still for a moment before bustling around the counter in the diner and grabbing my hands, trying to tug me into the kitchen so she could feed me.

I'd laughed and told her I didn't need to eat, which made her tut. But she told me to come and speak to her whenever I wanted—that it had been a long time since she'd had a conversation in her native tongue.

Languages came easily to me—they did to all aytorin, but I consumed them hungrily. I had managed to learn twelve from this world before the Herald enslaved me. The pressing need to learn others was less now, but Nun had already said she would gladly teach me Swedish, and Adam eagerly taught me the little bits of Spanish he knew. I didn't have the heart to tell him I was already fluent in it, because his cheeks would flush with happiness when I slowly repeated a word after him.

Staring at him, I gently tucked an errant curl behind his ear. He was so beautiful, my Adam, with his golden-brown skin and his soft, messy hair. His deep brown eyes were almost the exact shame shade as my blood. Perhaps that was a morbid analogy, but it called to something in the very core of me. He was meant for me. He was part of me.

I was fully cognisant of the fact that I had developed an intense oral fixation when it came to him. It wasn't even due to spending years with my jaw pried open and immovable. It was just him. His addictively sweet mouth. His smooth, warm skin and long limbs. The little thatch of dark hair nestled at the root of his beautiful cock, which I was eager to taste at every opportunity.

He brought me more pleasure than I had ever known possible. Not only with his beautiful body, but with just his presence. His sheer unflinching devotion. Humans were strange and flawed creatures, but they loved wholeheartedly. I was profoundly grateful that whatever lust for power

infected my brothers had not corrupted me, because I knew that Adam would do anything for me—anything at all. Anything I asked.

That knowledge made my chest ache. It made me want to hide him away from anyone who might have hurt him, to keep his heart and his body safe and whole. Not just to hoard them for myself, but because I knew that if anything could truly turn me into the mindless, bloodthirsty beast that Mary and the Herald had hoped I would become, it would be seeing him get hurt in any way.

Adam dropped his head to my shoulder and kissed my throat, snapping me out of my musings. I couldn't help but press kisses all over his hair and forehead.

"I know, I know, I'm a total sap." He rubbed the tip of his nose into my neck. "But that wasn't actually the reason I came to find you."

"No?" I pulled him closer and buried my nose in his hair, breathing in his scent. Mary's journal was already forgotten.

He shook his head, sitting up. "Seraph's totally losing it."

I grunted, sadness tugging at my gut. "Isn't he always?"

"No, I mean *really* losing it." Adam shot me a fearful look. "I'm pretty sure he's going to bust through the glass."

"If he does, he still can't escape, my love." I stood up and gently set Adam on his feet. "But I'll go and see if I can calm him down."

I could hear Seraph's gut-wrenching screams clearly when we headed outside hand in hand, making our way to the camp entrance. I wondered what had set him off so badly. Maybe something had approached his cage, though we rarely saw any dangerous creatures in the forest or on the horizon. Nothing like the skilos that had burst from the ground to consume us as we were travelling west through the stretch of land that humans called the Wastes.

Adam was less fearful of the Wastes now. He'd told me even setting foot outside of the camp walls used to scare him, which made the memories of him sneaking out in the middle of the night to come and speak to me pierce my chest with a sweet ache. Now though, he thought nothing of visiting Seraph with me. I fervently hoped that meant he felt safe by my side.

The borolesh had stayed in the forest behind the camp, and the sight of them gave me peace. Adam and Aury both liked to visit them often, and the two creatures were always happy to see us, letting us know with soft warbles and nudges of their great, drooping heads.

Before we could step inside the metal container to leave the camp, the withdrawn and aloof Lilac appeared in front of us from within, his high ponytail swinging behind him.

“There are people approaching the camp,” he said in his flat voice, green eyes calm but alert. “One of them is big. And purple.”

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Author’s Note

Thank you for reading Adam and Gloam’s story! Honestly, these two are my favourites. They’ve pushed Wyn and Danny off the top spot, I think. (I am sorry, my little smoke baby and precious, sweet human.)

I struggle to think of Rig as Rig anymore. He’s Adam to me now. Sweet, selfless Adam who just wants to help and feels kind of worthless, and is *super* happy for his best friend finding love but also misses him a bunch and feels guilty for things that aren’t really his fault. He carries a lot on his shoulders, but tries to hide it beneath a goofy, carefree persona.

He tried so hard for his big beastie in this book, and got put through a lot, so he had to have the happiest ending. He’s been Ghost’s guard dog for a long time, but now he has his own who will defend him to the ends of the earth. I love that for him.

Gloam is… ugh. My big, perfect, refined beastie who looks like he’d tear you to shreds (which he would, if you hurt Adam) but he just wants to learn all the languages and live in peace. He and Adam are similar in that they’re both eager to help people in need, and hate seeing anything suffering. He has also gone through a lot, but he considers it all to be worth it because he got Adam in the end. (He is his lion.)

I just LOVE this pair’s dynamic, and how devoted they are to each other. They become a little team out in the Wastes, despite all the obstacles they face. They are perfect for each other.

I’ve updated the Monster Index as per usual at the back of this book, and also added a Human Index so you can keep track of the humans we’ve met so far (including the villains).

What’s next?
Next is Moth’s book! Have you figured out who his person is yet?

Also, what secrets is he hiding, huh? Will he ever stop moping around the camp and get over Ghost? Come on, Moth. It’s not happening.

There are many more books planned for this series, including several novellas with monsters and guys we may have already met… and others with new characters. Exciting!

I will also be releasing the first of a m/m fae romance trilogy in the new year with a dark, moody fae assassin prince and a “normal” mortal guy who fall HARD for each other. I am so excited about it.

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Monster Index

Aytorin [ay-*tohr*-in]: One of the old races. Scholars who hoard words, knowledge and languages, and live in a ruined city to the south of the monster world that has fallen into disrepair as fewer aytorin are born. They roam their world always hunting for new knowledge. A humanoid species that is fairly introverted, with not many left. Speak an ancient language that holds power; knowing an aytorin's true name grants control. They live in small groups that are ruled by Matriarchs. In their species, Matriarchs impregnate the males, who carry the young until an opening naturally forms on their abdomen for them to be removed. The Matriarchs then feed and care for the young until they reach adulthood. Aytorin are always born in threes.

Appearance: Tall, bipedal and muscular. Grey, mottled skin that has decorative, thick cabling. Wide, rectangular pupils like a goat. Two tiny, velvet-covered nubby horns. Tapered ears. Small fangs and tusks.

Gloam (true name: Aedonimus ag ni Boetna) has textured ridges between his eyes, and no eyebrows, but the cabling gives the illusion of them. He is bald, with a black stain on the back of his head. A wide, flat, bridgeless nose and wideset eyes. Heavy cheekbones. He wears leather pants, big boots and has a leather harness over his shoulders. Until recently, he was owned by Collector Mary, and had a cage on his head and metal rings piercing his spine to keep him chained to her RV. He has a huge war hammer with a decorative handle.

Dain (true name: Metelimus ag ni Boetna) is the eldest of the ag ni Boetna triplets. He carries a double-bladed greataxe. He convinced his brothers to investigate the rumours of the Herald when they travelled to the human world to learn, and he quickly got drawn in.

Tide (true name: Neminos ag ni Boetna) is the youngest of the ag ni Boetna triplets. He carries a thick-handled mace with a round head covered in deadly spikes. He was drawn into the cult by Metelimus and the Herald.

Both brothers told the Herald the words to enslave Gloam, and forced rings through his jaw to hold his mouth open wide within his cage, so he couldn't speak. They also put the rings through his back at Mary's request.

Telyth [*tell*-ith]: One of the old races, known as Soul Eaters. Only seven remaining, including Wyn and Orlith. Humanoid, single-gender species that is born from eggs. Has the ability to dissipate into thick black smoke; can travel great distances this way. This ability is obstructed by behamots, whose rock-like skin sends vibrations that prevent dissipation. A species that does not need to eat, drink or sleep.

Appearance: Tall, rangy muscular build. Pale, greyish white skin. Black, curling horns that have jagged edges. Prominent brow bone and flat, bridgeless nose; sharp cheekbones. Thin, raised ridges across the curves of the forehead and cheekbones. Very sharp teeth.

Wyn is completely covered, head to toe, in scars. He has one pure black eye that can see death, and one that is white with just a tiny pinprick of a pupil. Long black hair. Black-stained fingertips. He typically wears heavy black boots, black pants, a loose black shirt and a long, grey coat with a ragged hem and a hood that conceals his face. 015 at the military's Nebraska base.

Orlith has one pure black eye that can see death, and one that is silver. Long white hair. Black markings extending up past his wrists. His horns are smoother than Wyn's, but have a second jagged spike. He wears a variety of coats; he likes to steal them from the human world, as well as other human items that he hoards in his nest in the monster world. Met by Wyn and Danny in Wyn's novella. Previously had a casual relationship with Wyn; was hoping Wyn would want to have babies with him. He's jealous of Danny.

Rycke [reek]: One of the old races, but not long-lived. Humanoid species. 001 at the military's Nebraska base—the first monster specimen the military captures. Feared by almost all other monsters. Described by Edin as 'unfathomably powerful—a dichotomy of unlimited violent rage and a peaceful, gentle nature'. Do not like causing harm, but become unstoppable when pushed to their limit. Fiercely protective by nature. Gain strength with age.

There is only ever one rycke, though there used to be many before they almost wiped themselves out. The rycke has a life seed inside them that gives them life. When the rycke dies, their body nourishes the seed to grow the new rycke. The seed brings with it the memories of the previous ryckes.

Appearance: Huge black, sinewy wings. Barbs on the side of their neck and down their spine. Dark, bird-like feet. Prominent black veins all over their body. Greenish-grey fingernails.

Aury has several scars, including a fairly severe burn scar on the right side of his face, which happened during the fall of the military's Nebraska base. His specimen brand is located beside his left shoulder blade. Until recently, his right wing was ruined, rendering both wings basically useless. He has chin-length, slightly wavy black-green hair. Big black eyes that have pinpricks of colour if you look close enough.

When Ghost is threatened, Aury changes form. This form is around twenty feet tall and his wings have a span of about sixty feet. He has four-foot-long barbs covered in jagged teeth down the length of his spine. Greenish-white skin with thick, raised, prominent black veins. Black talons on his hands and feet. A huge protruding jaw that juts out from his face, like a goblin shark. Giant, sunken black eyes, and a cavity instead of a nose. Basically, he ain't pretty.

He is observed by Danny at the military's Nebraska base in Book One, and mentioned by Edin in Book Two, before finding his human in Book Three.

Isdernuc [*iz*-der-nuck]: One of the old races. Edin's species, but he is the only one left after a rycke killed the rest of the last remaining tribe more than 5,000 years ago, when Edin was still an adolescent. Humanoid species. A species that does not need to eat, drink or sleep.

Appearance: Close to seven feet tall, with six-inch-long horns that curve up over the forehead. Pale lavender coloured skin. Extremely muscular. Long, prehensile tail with sharp tip. Dark purple hair and eyes, which are bigger than a human's and have much bigger irises. Craggy, intense demonic features. Fangs.

Edin wears a black kilt that ends just below the knee, heavy black boots, and a metal pendant on a leather strap around his neck, which is the last remaining item of his pack's that he owns—it is a piece of a metal bowl his mother made. Part of his right horn gets snapped off in Book Two, leaving the end of it jagged. He doesn't need to sleep, but he likes to—it energises him. 002 at the military's Nebraska base.

Parasite (species name: unknown): A parasitic monster that infects humans. They are the same species as Wyn; he can detect them, so he destroys them to stop them wiping out humanity. Capable of injecting deadly venom through its bite as a defence mechanism when threatened or a nest is attacked.

The life cycle of a parasite is as follows: a hatchling will crawl inside the mouth of an unaware human—usually while they are asleep—and into the digestive system. The human will, at this stage, start feeling somewhat ill as the parasite begins consuming all of the nutrients in the body as it prepares to lay its eggs. Once the eggs are laid in the stomach, the parasite uses its sharp teeth to escape the stomach; it expels a glue-like substance that it uses to 'patch' the tiny tear it has made in the stomach lining so that the host stays alive long enough to incubate the eggs. The parasite will then latch onto the spinal column to control the host's brain activity and keep the host functioning as the eggs incubate. During this time, the parasitic eggs continue to absorb nutrients through their permeable linings, causing the host to lose weight rapidly, weaken and eventually become too ill to function. When the eggs are ready to hatch, the host will expel them from the stomach and die, the parasite dying alongside it. The eggs then hatch and go off in search of new hosts.

Queens live in nests, laying eggs. A queen produces a thick jelly that creates the environment the eggs need to incubate outside of a host. She is normally tended to by worker parasites, which are bigger than normal parasites, and bring the queen food and tend to the eggs when they are ready to hatch, sloughing off the queen's jelly.

Appearance: Full-sized parasites at the end of their life cycle are about the size of a small rabbit. Dark, scaly skin. Twelve legs, thin and spindly and covered in hard bristles. Flat face with wide eyes like a housefly that curve around the sides of its head. Circular mouth with sharp teeth.

The parasite spawn expelled by a host is a thick, grey mucus, with the darker eggs visible. Hatchlings are tiny versions of adult parasites—about the size of a bumblebee.

Worker parasites are bigger—about the size of a small dog.

Queens are huge—car-sized—and shaped more like a tick, with a thinner thorax and a fat, bloated abdomen that is usually swollen with eggs. Two dozen legs with sharp ends that she uses as weapons.

Baregh [barr-egg]: Humanoid species that are typically employed as guards in the monster world, due to being big and hulking. Big and muscular; pale grey skin and a thick, dark mane of hair that extends down the back.

Observed by Danny and Wyn in the monster world in Wyn's novella. They guard the city of Thinir, including Moric Lor's hyll and public gardens.

Also seen briefly by Hunter in Book Two, at the fighting competition. This one is thickly scarred, chained up, and being forced to fight by another small, wiry species of monster with six arms.

Behamot [*bee*-ya-mott]: Described by Edin as 'tough, but not particularly smart'. Very hard to kill—the only ways of destroying them are to push them off a great height, causing their rock-like skin to shatter, or to set them on fire. A species that eats and sleeps. Meat eaters.

Appearance: Around seven-and-a-half to eight feet tall. Dark grey skin that is pebbled and rough like stone; basically impenetrable and as hard as rock. Squashed face with big tusks jutting up from their lower jaw.

Encountered by Hunter, Charlie, Edin and Wyn in Book Two. Also encountered long, long ago by Edin and Wyn when two behamots were taunting the Soul Eater about squishing his head under a big boulder, and Edin showed up to help—ripping his own arm off in the process.

Borolesh [*bohr*-oh-lesh]: Large, gentle species. Herbivores. Move on all fours. Pale skin the colour of sand that is wrinkled and hairless. Droopy, sagging faces. Three long, curving horns protruding from their bald heads. Long arms. They make soft, warbling sounds to communicate.

Observed in Book Two by Hunter, Edin, Danny and Wyn; encountered by the Nebraska camp in Book Three, and by Rig and Gloam in Book Four. Two borolesh were owned by Collector Mary, and pulled her RV across the Wastes until Gloam and Rig set them free. They now live in the forest behind the Nebraska camp.

Caffid [*kaff*-id]: A monster-world creature that lives on the sandy beaches to the north of the Caen an Sin in the monster world. They live buried in the sand and use their white, nerve-like tongues to hunt out critters. They migrate to the ocean to mate every few years.

Appearance: Very large—wide but relatively flat—but very placid. Described by Wyn as “quite ugly”. Mottled brown, domed hump of scales on their back that shimmer faint pink. Front flippers that they use to cover themselves in sand. Wide, flat head with tiny white eyes.

Observed by Danny and Wyn in the monster world in Wyn’s novella.

Cagin [*cay*-jin]: Muscular, bear-sized monster with dark brown hide that’s thick and solid, like armour. Domed, gleaming back that is impenetrable—even bullets can’t get through—but its weakness is on its underbelly, if you can stay alive long enough to flip it over. Long head with a split snout. Teeth that grow in every direction. Long, thin eyes. Poor eyesight, excellent sense of smell. Makes a soft warbling sound.

Cagins eat very infrequently, so will stalk the prey they choose for as long as it takes.

Encountered by Ghost and Aury in Book Three, when it is stalking a group of soldiers barricaded in an old house. It runs at the sight of Aury.

Forileun [fohr-*il*-ee-yun]: Invertebrate species. Secretes a poison from its claws that amplifies pain receptors to incapacitate its prey.

Appearance: About seven to eight feet tall on all fours. Four legs that are segmented and covered in hard bristles, ending with small claws that let it grip. Long, thin body (shaped, as Hunter describes, ‘like an ear of corn’) covered in dark bristles over a shiny exoskeleton. Long, curving neck and low-hanging face. Rectangular, vertical black eyes that wrap over the top of its head. Blunt, thick teeth.

Encountered by Hunter and Charlie in Book Two.

Karik [*kah*-rick]: A creature that looks like a large, land-walking squid, just with more legs that are sturdy, so it can run—fast. Mottled, blueish-purple skin that looks wet. Huge, bulbous eyes and a big mantle. Its beak is a big white protuberance fringed with little teeth. Their suckers can rip skin clean off the muscle. One rips Edin’s leg off when he is young, and Wyn comes across him and helps him. This is how they meet.

Encountered by Ghost in Book Three, when one has moved into the military’s Nebraska base after the rycke leaves. It chases him, but gets distracted when it is attacked by another monster.

Kerenis [keh-ren-iss]: Creature that hunts and feeds on anything warm and living; constantly searching for meals, which it smothers before consuming. Next to impossible to kill.

Appearance: Black blob-like monster that moves by rolling its body over itself in a constant undulation. Its underbelly is covered in teeth and ringed by thick black fronds that let it sense vibrations and movements from nearby creatures.

Encountered by Danny and Wyn in Book One.

Koleb [*koh*-leb]: Fairly primitive species that travel in big packs via tunnel networks that they dig. Known for their pilgrimages where the tribes meet to offer the best sacrifice to their god, in exchange for plentiful harvests and bountiful young. A species that eats and sleeps. Vegetarian.

Appearance: About four feet tall. Greenish-grey skin. Thin with spiny, hunched backs. Long arms that end with two long, clawed fingers. Long, floppy ears. Big mouths filled with shark-like teeth.

Encountered by Hunter and Charlie in Book Two.

The Mabs: The Mabs, Ara and Hag, are two ancient (more ancient than Wyn), gigantic beings that live in the Caen an Sin in the monster world and witness the sharing of time between lovers. Their “battles” shake the land. Worshipped as gods by most in the monster world, but not by Wyn.

Ara has pure black skin and either wears a white mask or has a face that looks similar to a stag skull, with enormous antlers. He wears blue-gold bands on his biceps and above his knees, and a short, sleeveless tunic made of white leather.

Hag has anaemic white skin and either wears a pure black mask or has a face that looks similar to a wild boar skull, with huge sharp tusks jutting out to the sides. He wears a short black leather kilt, and has strange markings down his shins and the centre of his chest.

Encountered by Danny and Wyn in the monster world in Wyn’s novella.

Mortik [*mohr*-tick]: Invertebrate species. Opportunistic hunters that lure their prey in by camouflaging themselves depending on their surroundings. Some have adapted since coming to the human world. Nocturnal.

Appearance: Described by Hunter as a ‘cross between a beetle and a scorpion, but the size of a cow’. Six segmented legs. Long tail with

extremely sharp stinger that secretes acid-like venom. Head that mimics a human face; small black eyes and open mouth with a long, thin black tongue that it tastes the air with due to poor vision.

Seen briefly by Danny in Book One; encountered by Hunter and Edin in Book Two in the tunnels.

Myrm [muhrm]: Big, worm-like creatures the size of a horse, covered in dark hair. Six short legs. Long, curving neck. Blank face with a wide slit for a mouth and two tiny black holes for eyes.

Observed by Ghost in Book Three, when he and Aury stop at the river after visiting the Topeka camp. Described by Edin to Hunter in Book Two —a myrm is the reason Edin was caught by the military and became specimen 002. He came across one that had been trapped by the military and was freeing it when they tranquilised him.

Nask: A monster-world creature described by Wyn as a "fat, ugly little creature" that engages in the "least enthusiastic mating dance" he's ever seen. They sleep for decades at a time.

Appearance: Squat, round bodies and stubby limbs. A disproportionately small head with bulbous eyes. Black, leathery skin with deep red markings that hint at their age, and a bright red underbelly. Moves with a jerky, back-and-forth walk.

Mentioned by Wyn, and observed by Danny and Wyn in the monster world in Wyn's novella. Danny wants to keep one as a pet. Wyn says no.

Pylk [pilk]: Part of Mary's monster menagerie. Gloam describes pylks as gentle and rare.

Appearance: Sinewy monster with long, slender limbs and three-fingered hands. Its skin is an electrifying shade of teal and its eyes are the same colour. Slim, genderless torso. Tiny button nose and small mouth, with raised patterns over its skin and no discernible ears.

Observed by Rig and Gloam in Book Four, when it appears to mimic Rig.

Rosir [*row*-seer]: A bug-like, monster-world creature with fluffy white wings.

Observed by Danny and Wyn in the monster world in Wyn's novella.

Salyik [*sal*-yick]: Humanoid species that live in the monster-world city of Thinir, but are relegated to the poorer areas close to the city's ports because they are the minority. Treated poorly by other citizens. Quiet and tall.

Observed by Wyn and Danny in the monster world in Wyn's novella.

The Herald is a power-hungry salyik that travelled through the tear and began amassing a following to create a cannibalistic cult that operates out of a shopping mall to the north west. They are guarded by Gloam's two brothers, Metelimus and Neminos, and enslaved Gloam when he refused to follow them with the brothers' help. They gave Gloam to Mary to act as her protector while she carried out her missionary work with the military.

Appearance: The Herald has long, white hair that is half tied back in complicated braids. Androgynous, inhumanly perfect face described by Rig as looking "like no one else alive, and a million other people all at once—blank enough to be forgettable". Ghostly pale skin covered in faint pink scales, and intense, pale pinkish-grey eyes. They wear long white robes made of an otherworldly fabric.

Encountered by Rig and Gloam when Mary takes them to the cult for Rig to become a coal.

Seraph (species name: unknown): 008 at the military's Nebraska base, until he vanished under classified circumstances. It turns out the military gave him to Mary for her menagerie. He is constantly screaming and thrashing in his cell, as if he is in intense pain. He was being kept on mysterious drugs by Mary and the military.

Appearance: Described by Danny as 'the stuff of literal nightmares'. Skin like old leather. Tall with long limbs and overly long fingers with extra knuckles. Rows of solid black and white eyes that ring the entire front half of his head, blinking sporadically. No nose, and a big, gaping mouth crowded with needle-sharp teeth.

Observed by Danny in Book One and encountered by Rig and Gloam in Book Four. They take him with them back to the Nebraska camp to try and help him.

Shulc [shuhlk]: Small, thin, bony monster that is hairless and a deep burgundy colour. Head shaped like a blank teardrop on its side, a smooth round skull thinning to a sharp point for a snout, which stretches into a wide

lamprey-like mouth when it is eating. Two small black eyes. Four spindly legs that end in two tiny claws, similar to a tarantula's tarsal claws. Makes a strange chittering noise when it's excited.

Encountered by the Nebraska camp in Book Three and by Rig and Gloam in Book Four. One was the domesticated pet of Collector Mary. Until her untimely death, it slept in her RV and appeared to enjoy being carried in her arms like a baby, though it was quick to eat her once she was dead. It tries to eat Cutter's hand (and half-succeeds). It definitely has a particular taste for arms and hands.

Skilos [*skee*-loss]: Mammoth worm-slash-millipede creature that burrows underground and bursts out of the ground when it senses vibrations from nearby prey. Waves its body through the air to distract its prey.

Appearance: Described by Rig as being "the length of a stretch limousine, as tall as a horse, and a toxic orange-red colour that screamed danger". Has hundreds of tiny sharp legs that let it move fast. Big white eyes and a wide, thin mouth that can open extremely wide, with stubby sharp teeth. Has a retractable barb on its tail end. Gooey orange blood.

Encountered by Gloam and Rig in Book Four, when one attacks them as they are travelling across the Wastes to Mary's place. Destroyed by Gloam.

Usho [*ooh*-show]: A monster-world species that is described by Wyn as "boring and logic-driven", which makes them good business owners (no offence to business owners—that's just Wyn's opinion). They tend to reside in cities, and are a dominant species in the city of Thinir in the monster world. Keep to themselves and have no natural predators due to tasting very bad. Somewhat arrogant.

Appearance: Bumpy, grey-green skin. Bulbous eyes. Thick necks and very wide mouths with lots of blunt, crowded teeth.

Encountered by Wyn and Danny in the monster world in Wyn's novella, several times. They are all very rude to Danny, so Wyn gets, ahem, protective.

Vint: Humanoid species that is dominant in the monster-world city of Thinir. Dark skin. Big, pointed ears that tend to be pierced and grow with age—their ears can get so large that they flop over. Long fingers, sharp teeth and elfin features. Sharp-tongued and combative. Keen botanists.

Moric Lor, who runs the corner of the world that Danny and Wyn visit in Wyn's novella, is a vint. He lives in a hyll—like a palace—at the top of the city and grows a vast garden of deadly plants in his public gardens.

Encountered by Wyn and Danny in the monster world in Wyn's novella. Observed by Danny in Book One—specimen 014 at the military's Nebraska base is a female vint with white hair. Seen briefly by Hunter in Book Two, pacing in a cage at the fighting competition.

Wanuk [wah-nuk]: A monster-world creature, about the size of a small pig, that resembles a large naked mole rat but with a beak instead of teeth, and six long, thin legs that end in sharp points.

Edin hunts one for Hunter and Charlie at the homestead in Book Two, but they decline to eat it. Wyn catches one in the monster world in his novella, to feed the soldier on his test-run. The shulc catches one for its dinner in Book Four, but Rig doesn't know what it is.

Unknown: Small creatures that look like reddish-brown, human hands with too many knuckles and too thin, bony fingers. Ten legs, five either side of its fleshy flat body. They make soft, termite-like nests in the ground.

Encountered by Rig in Book Four outside of the grounds to Mary's mansion.

Unknown: Monster with dark green skin. Long, rangy limbs and hands with three webbed fingers.

Kind of encountered by Rig in Book Four. He hears it in a little town he's trying to scavenge in, and Mary sends her pet shulc in to find it. The shulc rips its arm off and brings it back to the RV to eat.

Unknown: Shimmering scales in iridescent colours, and seems to live partly in water, because its cage at Mary's mansion was half-filled. Part of Mary's monster menagerie.

Encountered by Rig and Gloam in Book Four.

Unknown: A prehistoric-looking, bird-like creature covered in multicoloured feathers that are leathery and stiff. Heavy protruding brow, big black eyes and wide beaked mouth. Described by Rig as the "kaleidoscope bird". Part of Mary's monster menagerie.

Encountered by Rig and Gloam in Book Four.

Unknown: Big creature with six long, thick arms and a round, blank body. Described by Rig as “a monstrous version of those thin, wispy spiders that are everywhere when summer is coming to an end”. Part of Mary’s monster menagerie.

Encountered by Rig and Gloam in Book Four.

Unknown: A big cat-like creature with blindingly white, leathery skin decorated with lavender stripes. Part of Mary’s monster menagerie.

Encountered by Rig and Gloam in Book Four.

Unknown: Docile-appearing creature with a squat, brownish-orange body, long tail and orange eyes. Part of Mary’s monster menagerie.

Encountered by Rig and Gloam in Book Four.

Unknown: Extremely tall monster covered in pale hair, with arms so long they drag on the ground. Fairly aggressive.

Encountered by Ghost in Book Three, when one distracts the karik that is chasing him, giving him the chance to escape.

Unknown: Short, wide female monster with yellowish-green, wet-looking skin. Lightbulb-shaped head with no discernible neck. Four long arms that end in three thick, tentacle-like fingers. Long, thick, dark green, rope-like strands protruding from her head that move independently. Flat face; thin lips and no nose—just two slitted nostrils. Long, thin eyes with horizontal pupils.

Encountered by Hunter and Edin in Book Two; one of them mans the sign-up table at the fighting competition. She hits on Edin and Hunter gets bratty about it.

Unknown: Tall, gangly monster with ‘freakishly long’ limbs (according to Hunter) with an extra joint. Covered in coarse brown hair.

Encountered by Hunter and Edin in Book Two; one of them guards the front prison entrance where the fighting competition is held. Nosy. Bit of a creep.

Unknown: Humanoid species. Tall, hulking monster with leathery tan skin that's hairy in places. Thick, clawed fingers. Beady black eyes. Big tusks that distort his lower lip.

Encountered by Hunter and Edin in Book Two; he is the lover of the fightmaster at the fighting competition.

Unknown: Tall, wispy pale monster, dressed in long dark robes. Moves like it is almost floating. Long fingers. Featureless face except for two small dark eyes.

Seen briefly by Hunter in Book Two, at the fighting competition. It is the owner of the human fighter who Charlie goes up against.

Unknown: Troll-looking creature. Pebbled, mustard-colour skin.

Seen briefly by Hunter in Book Two, at the fighting competition. It is the owner of the human fighter who Hunter has to fight.

Unknown: 007 at the military's Nebraska base. Tall, slender humanoid species. Non-gender-specific. Pale grey. Angular yet flat face with alien-like features and big dark eyes.

Observed by Danny in Book One, standing in the centre of their cell, unmoving.

Unknown: Female monster species. Sunburnt red skin. Long arms and legs. Small, open ring of tentacles for a mouth. Two thin slits for nostrils. Circular black and white eyes.
Encountered by Danny in Book One, as the leader of the small pack that try to take Danny. Destroyed by Wyn.

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Human Index

Anchor (real name: unknown): Co-leader (currently sole leader) of the Nebraska raider camp. Anchor has been out in the Wastes ever since the monster apocalypse—she found Cat when she was just a teenager, and together (with a certain shy winged monster) they built their camp. Good at keeping things fair among the raiders. In charge of provisions. A bit of a taskmaster. She sees herself as a mother to a lot of the raiders, so tends to come across as stern or harsh when she's worried about them. Egyptian.

Appearance: Dark, curly hair typically worn up in a ponytail. Dark eyes and bushy eyebrows. Average height and slim, rangy build.

Cat (real name: unknown): Co-leader (but currently MIA) of the Nebraska raider camp. Cat was found alone by Anchor in the Wastes when they were just teenagers, and together they built the raider camp. A calm, protective leader who most of the raiders look up to. Loves to read—his room at the camp is stuffed with books he's scavenged. African American.

Currently Cat is being held at the fighting prison to the north. He declined the chance to escape with Hunter and Charlie, claiming there was someone there he couldn't leave behind.

Appearance: Dark hair and very dark eyes. Tall and solidly built.

Charlie: Soldier and Hunter's best friend. Charlie is more easygoing and less grumpy than Hunter. He tends to hum the Mamas and the Papas or talk a lot when he's nervous. Grew up on a farm before the monster apocalypse. Addiction to sugar he is not even remotely interested in kicking. Irish American.

Charlie was captured by kolebs and behamots to be their human fighter in the fighting prison further north. He meets Cat at the prison, as they share a cell for the one night he is there before Hunter, Wyn, Edin and Danny rescue him.

Appearance: Dark hair and grey eyes. Fairly tall, and slim but muscular build.

Danny: Wyn's human and former (terrible) soldier. A total sweetheart. Danny joined the military after his mother died, because he had nothing else, but quickly realised he wasn't cut out to be a soldier. Luckily, he met Wyn. Fairly insecure, but easygoing. Somewhat clumsy but would never admit it. Loves to tease Wyn. Loves Wyn full stop. Irish American.

Appearance: Dark hair, bright blue eyes and golden skin. Fairly tall, with a slim but muscular build. His nose is crooked, thanks to being broken by Mallory, and he has a tiny scar on his chin that he got as a kid while being clumsy. He is missing the little toe on his left foot. He is a beautiful little sugar muffin.

Ghost (real name: Gage): Aury's human and raider who lives at the Nebraska camp. Ghost is the camp's scout and main scavenger—meaning he has to go out into the Wastes alone a lot, and it terrifies him. (Although not anymore—now he has a big terrifying beastie to protect him.) Good at sewing. Has quite severe anxiety, and just a touch of imposter syndrome. Loves to read, and loves to listen to Aury reading to him. American.

Appearance: Pale with brown hair and blue eyes. If he's not in his room, he religiously wears his gas mask, which covers the lower half of his face. Slightly below average height and slim build.

Hunter: Edin's human and former soldier (he gave it all up for that big purple bastard). Grump and a hardass. Bad at talking about emotions. Impatient and can be reckless when he wants to get stuff done. He lives at the homestead with Edin (and currently Charlie) and he freaking loves it. American.

Appearance: A big hunk of muscle. Light brown hair and golden-brown eyes. He has a scar running from his left temple, over his cheek and mouth to his chin, which pulls the side of his upper lip into an adorable little snarl. He's missing his left leg from below the knee, and wears a prosthetic. Very tall—six-foot-five—and a thick, muscular build.

Lilac (real name: unknown): Raider and resident killer of the Nebraska camp. Closed off, very quiet and hard to read. Keeps his emotions (and everything else) to himself, but he is very loyal to those he cares about—namely Ghost and Rig. A plant lover who oversees the crop-growing at the

camp. Maybe, secretly a softie—he would never admit that he loves Ghost's laying hens. He has a machete. Japanese American.

Appearance: Very dark hair always worn in a high ponytail and vivid green eyes. Average height and compact, toned build.

Moth: Half-human. A nomad who sticks close to the Nebraska camp area. Cocky and arrogant, but desperately in love with Ghost (sorry, pal).

Appearance: Long, silvery-white hair and very pale eyes. Tall and rangy muscular build. Covered in weird tattoos from his neck to his fingertips. He is almost unnaturally beautiful.

Rig (real name: Adam): Gloam's human and raider who lives at the Nebraska camp. Camp fixer and general 'handyman'—good with his hands. (Gloam would say he is *very* good with his hands.) He is eager to please, wants to help everyone and secretly feels kind of worthless (until Gloam makes him see how amazing he is). Compassionate and fiercely loyal to those he cares about, and will go to the ends of the earth for them. Tries to stay optimistic. Has a cobbled together pipe gun that is definitely not safe to shoot. Mexican American.

Appearance: Golden brown skin, deep brown eyes and brown hair. Biggish nose and kind, honest face. Often wears a leather mask with metal studs, and a fringed western jacket that was his pride and joy. Average height and build.

Nebraska Raider Camp (Other raiders mentioned by name)

Apollo: Raider and camp medic. Laidback and compassionate. Dutch American. Long blond hair often worn in a messy bun, brown eyes. Slim build.

Bo: Raider and camp cook (alongside Daisy). Very kind and gentle. Friendly to everyone. Really into the idea of having a perpetual stew going at the camp, but no one else is interested. Big, solid build. Native American.

Cutter: Raider and camp asshole. Bigoted—he hates monsters with a passion. Doesn't trust the military, hence why he lives in the Wastes despite

his fervent hate for monsters. American.

Cutter's whereabouts are currently unknown, after he was banished from the camp for pushing Ghost off the camp wall. He previously lost his hand when Mary's pet shulc ate half of it, and Apollo had to amputate the rest.

Daisy: Raider and camp cook (alongside Bo). Mother figure to a lot of the raiders—wants to look after them. She is kind but fierce. Korean. Small and slim.

Keen: Raider. Blond hair. Wears a blue mask. American.

Nun: Raider and camp badass-with-a-crossbow (that Lilac is secretly jealous of). Swedish. Tall with a solid build. Blonde hair and blue eyes.

Rusty: Raider. Possibly sleeping with Lilac. More scared of the monsters in the camp than she lets on. Irish American. Long, red hair worn in a braid. She wears a full-face mask—one of those blank masks you can get at craft stores. It's creepy.

Villains and the Military

Captain Hamish: Deceased. Killed by Wyn. Oversaw the military's specimen programme at the Nebraska base, until it was destroyed when Wyn set all the monsters free. Took part in Danny's torture when the military shot Wyn and captured Danny, until Wyn was healed enough to kill him and rescue Danny.

Lieutenant Mallory: Deceased. Killed by Wyn. Danny's direct superior while he was in the military, and took part in his torture when they shot Wyn and captured Danny. He was also part of a small group of military officers involved in the fighting prison, until Wyn found him. He stole Wyn's dagger when it was left behind at the Utah base. But Wyn got it back.

Major Bratton: Was working with Mary on her monster collection. He gave Seraph to her when the military didn't want him anymore.

Mary: Deceased. Killed by Gloam. Monster collector who roamed the Wastes and had a menagerie of beautiful and interesting monsters in her mansion to the west. She was an avid follower of the Herald, and was trying to pull the military into the cult. Dark hair and watery blue eyes. Short and plump. She always had immaculate painted nails.

The Herald gifted Gloam to Mary to act as her protector while she carried out her missionary work. She had complete control over him and made him do everything for her, and treated him terribly.

Ryker: Deceased. Killed by Aury. An opportunistic raider who killed the Topeka camp's leaders, Wick and Vesta, and took over with his goons. Until one of them made the unfortunate error of punching Ghost when Aury was there.

Other

Hall: Deceased. Killed by Aury. Topeka camp raider.

Samson: Unwilling member of the Herald's cult. He saves Rig when Mary takes him there as the newest 'coal', but says he cannot leave because he has the mark of the Herald. He hates it. Bitterly calls himself a "true son of the Herald". He was born in the cult. Pale blond hair shaved close to his head, brown eyes and freckles.

Sun: Deceased. Killed by Aury. Topeka camp raider.

Unknown: Very confused soldier who Wyn steals from his post at the tear for his test-run, to make sure the monster world is safe for Danny.

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About the Author

Lily Mayne writes what she loves to read: achingly sweet yet gritty romances against unusual backdrops—dark, futuristic, dystopian and more. She enjoys reading and writing (duh), baking, watching terrible horror movies and many other hobbies that would have potentially made her an ideal Victorian maid. Just a really lazy one.

She currently lives in the UK with her husband and several fluffballs, who like to make a lot of noise while she's writing.

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